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Yomu Mishima
三嶋与夢
illustration
ともぞ
ヒーロー文庫

Sevens

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Author: Wai

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Prologue

We sat, stuffed, into the loading area of a large wagon.

When the gate came into view, the other customers headed for Beim began confirming their luggage, and making preparations to dismount.

I, 【Lyle Walt】, removed the hood of my robe, and confirmed the view through the openings in the canvas.

Scratching my blue hair, I found it to be a little sticky.

In order to expedite our travel, the horse-drawn wagon had constantly been on the move.

Therefore, we had often moved along without break, and around me, I could see the worn out faces of many men and women of all ages.

Clenching the blue necklace hanging from my neck, I surveyed the walls of Beim.

“They’re higher than Centralle’s. So this is the land of merchants and mercs.”

It was a place sought after by many adventurers and merchants and while I couldn’t call the ride pleasant, the road that lead to Beim was incomparable to any other.

Removing her hood, 【Novem Forxuz】 began tying her hair into its usual side ponytail.

Her violet eyes watched over me.

“Lyle-sama, let’s confirm our luggage.”

I nodded, and checked for my hand-baggage.

Of course, despite our long travels, we had little to carry along.

I won't say it was just a single bag per person, but still we were on the lesser side.

There were a few customers around us struggling with their overly numerous belongings.

With red hair and violet eyes, 【Aria Lockward】 ran a hand down her hair as she began to complain.

"We really are unlucky. The hell's with the coupled carriage breaking down…"

The reason we were on a wagon most of the way was because the carriage had broken down.

Rather than waiting, we determined transferring to the horse-drawn set up especially for that purpose would promise a quicker arrival.

Though it's not like we had no other option.

Setting her deep blue hair with a hand comb, 【Clara Bulmer】's red eyes were directed at the 【Monica】, who was wearing a robe over her standard maid uniform.

"There was no helping it. They had to do regular maintenance, and it seems the state they were in was one where two of the passenger cars wouldn't move. And using Porter would attract the wrong eyes."

With her golden double ponytails being tugged at by a nearby child, Monica refuted.

"The fruit of my and that chicken's love attracting the wrong eyes… so be it then. Rather than spending the last few days in a state like this, it would be the absolute better option. So what? Next you're going to voice dissatisfaction at a maid outfit? Let me tell you *my* maid uniform is a battledress adapted for combat in any situation."

Originally an automaton discovered in the depths of a Labyrinth, Monica seemed to hold a different view of what maids were supposed to be

than the world at large.

Why did the ancients build something with such functionality, then get stuck up on making it a maid… I am unable to understand it.

A distance a few days by coupled carriage took several times that by wagon. And finally, we were approaching Beim.

Pale pink—when I said that, the individual herself persisted it was pink blond—anyways, removing her pink blonde hair from her hood, the elven girl with elongated tips to her ears, 【Eva】, patted off her hips.

“I don’t really care, but that sure was a ride, even with maintained roadways. I’m sure we would have been better off on foot.”

Having formerly been part of a tribe that spread performances on the move, it seems she preferred walking herself.

With light purple hair, and golden eyes, 【Shannon Circry】 objected.

She was the youngest among us, and quite unreliable when it came to physical prowess.

“Hell no. Just how far do you think that would be? If we’re not taking Porter out, then a wagon is one hundred times better!”

Pulled by only two horses, I was convinced what we were crammed onto was one meant for short distances rather than what it had just been put through.

It didn’t serve an ample replacement for a coupled carriage, but it promised a safer trek than on foot.

Because it was surrounded by vigilant adventurers on horseback.

With light emerald hair, 【Miranda Circry】 lowered her fist onto the top of Shannon’s head.

And as her sister became teary eyes, Miranda spoke.

“You need to build up some stamina too. At this rate, you’ll end up as extra luggage.”

“I never planned to become an adventurer to begin with.”

As Shannon averted her face, and Miranda started to pinch it, both of them seemed to be having fun.

They were comrades of the same party, and reliable enough, but they always seemed to draw attention to themselves.

A peddling male seated beside me called out.

We were on the level of having conversed a few times over the last few days, and he was aware of the fact we were all adventurers. He gave a bitter smile.

“That’s quite a biased selection you have there. Isn’t it rough being the only man in a circle of ladies?”

I nodded a few times.

“Let’s see. It really is rough. In truth, I do want to get in a few men, and achieve some sort of balance.”

He laughed.

“Something the matter?”

“Don’t mind it. It’s just because there are plenty of sorts of adventurers in Beim. It’s not like yous sort of party is rare or anything. But those of your trade see it as nothing but a pain. And it’s a treat to see the oblivious ones look at them with envy.”

Maintaining a harem was serious business.

In a job with lives at stake, there’s little time for one to pay mind to love and life and all that other stuff.

Male and female relations among adventurers bred nothing but worry.

If possible, a party's leader should wish to gather up members of the same gender.

Because separating work and private matters was normally the smarter way to go about it.

"… Well, it's already come down to this, so I do plan to give an effort on my part."

The man smiled.

"That so? Well have at it then. Now it looks like we've finally arrived."

While he was saying that, the wagon entered into the line at the city's gate filing for entry.

It would take some time from here. A large number of guards were stationed at the city's entrance point, efficiently carrying out customs work.

With its use by many merchants world-wide, the entry process was smoother than the other towns and cities I'd come upon.

The walls surrounding it were thick, and high enough to make one crane their head.

They weren't constructed of piled stone. The outer face was seamless and glossy, likely having had some magical process bestowed unto it.

And what lay beyond those sturdy walls was a city with more energy than any I had been to before—The City of Merchants and Adventurers—the free city of 【Beim】.

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Nearby the gate, where goods passed in and out enmasse, we

dismounted the wagon, and stretched a little to loosen our bodies.

Coaches and carts, even coupled carriages went to and from. The clouds of dust they kicked up held horrid stanch, and made it hard to breath.

Novem…

"How about we move at once?"

The other party members affirmed that statement with doubtful faces.

Quite a bit had happened with them and Novem, and quite an antagonism had built up between her and Miranda.

"Give me a break already. We're moving."

Thinking they could at least try to get along on the surface, I walked ahead. Monica raced up to my side.

"Hey, you were just thinking how nice it would be if we got along on the surface, right?"

As she hit it on the mark, I averted my gaze for a moment.

And while forcing a smile…

"L-look, isn't it best if we all just… got along? As a party, I mean."

Miranda scoffed.

"Hah? That girl over there irrelevant to any of that. And it's more wholesome and healthy than going about it behind everyone's back, isn't it? By the way, what plans do we have for today?"

That was likely referring to registering at the Guild.

Of the two cards issued, one of them had to be turned in, and the paperwork had to be filled out for a home change request.

Unless we did that, it would be logistically impossible for us to work as adventurers in Beim.

“We’ll rest for the day, and carry it out tomorrow. Or perhaps the day after that.”

Normally, we would have rested the day we arrived, and done all the forms the next.
But there was a reason we couldn’t do that this time around.

Separating from the smoky gate, and looking up at the wall, several tall buildings of Beim came into sight.

Among them were some that easily surpassed those of Centralle.

Their height was one thing, but their designs lacked a sense of uniformity.

While pursuing functionality, it was a city that looked like it costed a bit of money.

That was the impression I had of the place.

Hearing my words, Aria walked over.

“It’s the same no matter where we register, right? Then let’s just make it the closest one.”

Clara cautioned her.

“Aria-san, having information is important. There are four guild branches existing in Beim, and the headquarters in the center. There wouldn’t be a problem, if they simply sought to quarter their efforts without giving much thought to it, but if each has its own characteristics, it will be a pain to backtrack.”

Right, Beim had four different Guilds, and even the organization’s headquarters on top of that.

It was called the city of Adventurers, and perhaps they existed in such

numbers it was impossible to delegate them to a single place, or maybe something else entirely. Whatever the case, there were four branches present.

Centralle… when we gathered information back at the capital, that much was made clear enough.

But what was happening at each one still remained quite vague.

Because there was nothing but rumors floating around, we were lost as to which one to register at.

Unable to tell just what rumor to trust, I thought to take a few days to confirm it all, so I left some time in between our imminent registration.

There, I heard a voice from the Jewel.

The blue Jewel used to be nothing but a simple gem.

But right now…

『Several presences without hostility, and one with. They're approaching while remaining wary. Be careful, Lyle.』

The voice had come from the ornament, and it was only audible to me.

The one to speak it was 【Brod Walt】. My grandfather, and the Seventh Generation Head of the Feudal Noble Walt House.

He had reached the status of a Count, and all I ever saw of him was the withered form of an older man.

But within the Jewel, he shape in his thirties.

His grey hair was tidily swept back, and I only ever got the impression of him being a kind grandfather.

The answer seemed to depend largely on the person.

Noble and strict, a man fitting of a Count position, they'd say.

I gathered everyone close, and made an alteration to the direction we were headed.

There, the pursuing presence started coming at faster rate.

Various Skills were recorded on the Jewel, and the ancestors did teach me their uses.

It should be a convenient tool, but my Blue Jewel seemed to hold value over what a tool would.

… I mean, it did let me hear advice from my predecessors.

Shannon jumped off the wagon, and hurriedly walked our way. Perhaps she was getting near her limit, as she raised the white flag.

“Wait! Don’t go on…”

As Monica moved to offer Shannon a hand, I let out a sigh.

The one to help her up first was one displayed as yellow on the area map in my head.

With the indicators, blue meant an ally, red an enemy. Those not particularly conscious of me, and all others showed up as yellow.

The map was the Fifth’s Skill, and the indicators the Sixth’s.

They showed me the movements of people around.

“Do you have some business with us?”

I implored the person that showed up as red.

We also kept watch of the others that came into contact with Shannon.

The one I faced was a man of small build, and narrow eyes.

“If you noticed, you could have just stopped. Oh, I’m no one

suspicious, mind you. Though that makes me sound all the more so. I'm a so called information dealer. Of course, I also show newbies around Beim."

The slender man gave his greetings, so I went into negotiations.

"And by that, do you mean sightseeing?"

"Not exactly. Ah, I won't call that wrong. What I'm trying to say is that my customers are adventurers."

So he approached knowing we were adventurers.

As I wondered over what his objective was, the man swiftly…

"Now then how about we give a little self-introduction? I am a former adventurer. At present, I'm charging to lead around newbies and seasoned vets dropping by the city for the first time. About each guild's structure, characteristic, and even specific information. Even all the shops you might need to use. Want to try leaving it to me?"

He must be raking in money from teaching what's common knowledge to out-of-towners, it seems.

I heard the Third's voice from within the Jewel.

『Well it is a large and complex place, and there's a limit to what we can do alone… it's a place I'd even want to use my Skill, but doing that here is a bit…』

The Third's 【Mind】 Skill was one to influence the psych.

It was a convenient one that let you extract information from others, but if there's too much a gap in strength with the one I use it on, it won't accomplish anything.

Around us, I sensed others observing the dialogue.

"What is the market price?"

When I asked, the narrow-eyed man smiled.

“For a whole day, two silvers. Oh, I do realize that’s quite a high cost, but there’s a definite meaning behind it. It’s cheaper than spending a few meaningless days in Beim, and you can find stores precisely to you request, perhaps? And this is a place with danger around every corner. Rather than wandering where the ill-breds gather and causing a ruckus, paying a sum, and learning it all is a huge advantage in my books.”

The map in my head was complicated, and it did seem like it would be a pain to navigate.

Even if we were to spend a break day or two, we should really learn the dangerous areas beforehand.

I took two silvers from my wallet, and sought some confirmation.

“You say a whole day, but there’s barely any time left to spend today.”

Perhaps he knew that, as when I took the money out, his indicator shifted all the way to blue.

“I’ll be introducing an inn today, and I don’t mind if you pay me tomorrow.”

I sent him quite a dubious glance.

“You don’t think we’ll run? And all you’re doing today is showing us an inn, free of charge? Then you’ve got no earnings to speak of, don’t you?”

The narrow-eyed man laughed.

“No, sorry. Yep, it looks like there’s no merit in it for me. But introducing you to an inn gets me a commission, so don’t worry about it. Yep, I guess it really is something strange outside Beim. Anyways, I’m thankful for you showing care for my sake. I’m always free to take tips.”

I was about to open my mouth, but decided against it.

After I handed over a few large coppers, he went on.

“Well you sure are a profuse one. Now then, eight for lodging, is it? What sort of pricing are you looking for? I think you’ll be using it for a couple weeks, so you should look for one below your expected budget. But if your pockets are deeper than they look, an expensive one with safety as its first priority may be nice to relieve your stress.”

In Beim, we’ll be dealing with adventurers.

Even if we worry on our side, nothing will come of it.

I told him an amount, and he listed off some possibilities. Within them, I chose one that fit the conditions, left guiding us there to him, and we walked off with the narrow-eyed man at the lead.

The Fourth reluctantly agreed.

『Two silver is painful for a tour. But without wasting time, he’ll introduce us to shops to some extent, and show us the city as well… I guess it was the right choice, time-wise, at least.』

Generally, as long as adventurers didn’t go solo, a single night at an inn would cost several persons-worth of lodging fees.

The larger the scale one worked in, the higher the expense.

With that in mind, two silver to cut down required time was something to be thankful for.

At that moment, I heard a voice from afar.

Turning around, I saw a young man with a large sword on his back approached by a similar information dealer.

His upper equipment was lightweight… or wait, that’s practically undergarments already, and yet he wore sturdy metal armor below the waist. He wore boots and knee guards as well. With such an unbalanced appearance, the young man called out in a loud voice.

“Two silver coins? Cut the crap! You think there’s a single idiot out there who’d pay that much just to be shown the roads!?”

Hearing that voice, the Sixth teased me.

『Lyle, he just called you an idiot. How about saying something back?』

I decided not to get involved, and proceeded onwards.

The narrow-eyed man gave a wry smile.

“And those kids really trying to become adventurers of Beim? You should never call out to people like that.”

He seemed fed up with those of his trade.

Chapter 1: The Four Guild Branches

The morning after the day we arrived in Beim.

I exited my room, and descended the stairs to the first floor of the inn. In the space used as a dining hall, the narrow-eyed man was finishing a meal.

To the man who ate with a delightful grin on his face, the inn's proprietor directed a bitter smile.

Breakfast was a service for those staying overnight, and not something offered to general customers, or so I thought.

Noticing me, the man waved his hand.

"Howdy. Wanna join?"

"You were waiting for us this early in the morning?"

He opened his eyes wider than usual, and pointed to his plate.

"The breakfast here is delicious. After I waited here a few hours for my precious customers, the owner over there asked if I wanted a meal. Quite a nice person, ain't he?"

The owner held up both hands, and waved them dismissively.

While the man did seem to know his way around words, he was eating quite happily.

The one working the desk came over to me, and went over the menu.

The menu had a nice selection of soup.

"Corn soup please."

After I said that, the owner headed for the kitchen, and the employee

also parted from the table.

As I sat in front of the narrow-eyed man, he leisurely proceeded to eat.

Cutting bread up fine, and dipping it in soup.

“Corn soup sure is nice. But among adventurers, there are quite a few who’d pay an extra fee to get some meat on the table. You sure that’s enough for you, Lyle-kun?”

Adventurers moved their bodies around a lot.

Those that took part in battle frequently ate quite a bit.

Not just meat dishes, it isn’t rare to find one ordering several slices of steak in the morning, apparently.

“We’re just sightseeing today, after all. Why not order some yourself?”

“I’m eating on their good will. I can’t be *that* shameless, you know.”

Meaning the man before my eyes wasn’t even considering dropping a coin for his meal.

As I smiled, the employee brought over breakfast.

With the cold days that had been upon us, a hot bowl of soup was exceedingly fulfilling.

While I enjoyed the warm feeling spreading through my stomach, and the flavor of the broth, the narrow-eyed man started drinking a cup of water and observing my actions.

“What’s the matter?”

“No, I just thought you ate quite neatly, is all. Even so, won’t any of you comrades come down?”

We borrowed four two-person rooms, and Monica slept standing in

mine.

She was cleaning at the moment, so the only one who came down was me.

“They’re spending their time preparing, or perhaps still asleep. See, there’s still a ways to go to the time we scheduled and all.”

He nodded, and went into the day’s plan.

“Then I guess I’ll give you the details first. There’s a bit I’d like to ask about as well.”

Something he wanted to ask me? I tilted my head.

“Don’t mind it. Just wanted to ask what you wanted to do for the night’s entertainment. Personally, I can introduce a place or two, but your party’s a special sort, so I should probably ask you first. So you need anything like that?”

I endured the urge to choke, and violently shook my head.

I won’t say I’m completely uninterested, but at present, I don’t have the leisure to play around like that.

But I did hear a teasing voice from the Jewel.

It was the Sixth.

『What’s the matter? How about you learn to play a little? Anything you catch can be fixed up with magic, one way or another.』

Hearing that, the Fourth shouted out.

『Right, so he’ll pull down his pants, go to Novem-chan, and say, ‘I’m sick, so please treat me?’ Absurd!』

I’d like to avoid such a situation as well.

The narrow-eyed man chuckled.

“I’ll bet. The green-haired one looks a little dangerous, and perhaps it’s best for your own wellbeing if you stay earnest, Lyle-kun. Oh, right, if you’re ever curious, you can usually find me loitering around the gate, so call out any time. I’ll bring you to a nice place in a jiffy. I can even match it to your price range. And I will say it’s probably best you don’t try searching for one by yourself.”

He cautioned me.

While there was the matter of his commission, it appears there were plenty of shady shops as well.

“When young adventurers unaccustomed to city life get themselves a spot of money, and experience failure, then it all comes down to gambling, drink, and women. If they don’t learn how to play around in moderation, it’ll surely bite them later. Right, when you think about it like that, perhaps it’s best you learn some while you can.”

While watching narrow-eye’s smile, I finished the meal.

After drinking some water, and taking a deep breath, he started going into the characteristics of Beim.

“Beim is where people, and goods, and money gather. But you have to take care; it’s not just one good thing after another. Even if you can walk around them normally during the day, there are some places that become life-threatening at night.”

Walking around a complex city like Beim required some caution.

I listened to his description of areas generally used by Adventurers, and places best never to enter.

While we were in the middle of that, I heard footsteps coming down the stairs.

It was Novem.

“Good morning. So you were with the guide? I thought we had some

time to spare."

To Novem's questioning gestures, the narrow-eyed man narrowed his eyes even further.

"No, I can't go about making a customer wait, right? It's important to arrive ahead of schedule."

Showing off his composure, the man turned from Novem to me.

The employee approached Novem, and confirmed the day's menu.

And narrow-eyes muttered to himself.

"… As I thought, it was my luck to have called out to them."

Swallowing those words with water, he changed the subject, and continued talking about Beim.

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Evening.

I had thought touring Beim to be an easy task, but I couldn't have been more wrong.

Shannon was resting on Monica's back, and perhaps even Aria was tired, as she was making quite a withered expression.

Eva showed interest towards a variety of things, but she was already unsteady on her feet.

Only Novem and Miranda were normal. Clara was tired out by the crowds alone, and tipsy. Her face was flushed red.

The Free City of Beim had an exceedingly large number of people.

I thought Centralle was a lot, but it was incomparable.

Our final landmark this time around, a Guild Branch, was finally before our eyes.

We had operated in the two guilds of Dalien and Arumsaas, but the building he named as the guild branch was a surprising sight.

I…

“There are four of this scale?”

The narrow-eyed man smiled as he explained.

“Nope. The busiest one’s the guild closest to the harbor. The other ones are generally the same, I guess, but the one used most by the mercenaries is smallest, perhaps.”

Mercenary brigades were something akin to giant households.

I ended up wondering whether it was really alright for the branch used by those groups to be the smallest.

Noticing something, Miranda cut into the conversation.

“So that one’s primarily an intermediary?”

He snapped his fingers, and affirmed her response.

“Travelling all over the lands, while they do slay monsters, their main goal is mercenary soldier work. Rather than actively pursuing monsters, working on the battlefield or challenging a labyrinth is much more productive. Based on the situation, some can play around for quite some time after laying hands on the treasures in a labyrinth’s depths. Of course, they do properly buy off magic stones and materials, but requests asking for mercenary work usually end up there. If you want to take it the other way, you won’t find any other sorts of jobs there.”

The guild by the harbor dealt with monsters of the sea, it seems.

A large portion of monsters that appeared underwater were too small to be a real threat.

But giant ones weren't too rare, making for giant spoils to be found. Because of that, the Guild had expanded in scope considerably.

Novem sought confirmation.

"What of the remaining two?"

The narrow-eyed man put his hand to his chin, and explained.

"The level of their service is the same. Though you'll get some differences by receptionist, they both primarily focus on training, so I doubt much is different. It's all up to you guys."

Saying it was up to us, he looked over our party, and nodded a couple of times.

"There's a few patterns those operating in Beim follow. See, you can find specialized adventurers at other guilds, right? In Beim, those sorts gather at the Harbor and one other. Otherwise… you can get dispatch requests to other lands as well."

"Dispatch, is it?"

On Novem's query, he gave a through explanation.

What differed in Beim's guilds from the rest was the number and quality of adventurers.

With four branches to speak of, the numerical figures they employed were on another level of any other city out there.

So could all those adventurers put food on the table with what work they could find around the city? The answer, of course, is no.

Therefore, the option the city selected was to dispatch adventurers to other lands.

To places short of hands, or that needed support, they were always ready to send able men their way.

But what I was curious of was…

“So you can operate all over the place without changing home guild? And wait, won’t it take time to move?”

Scratching his head, the man made a troubled expression.

“Yeah, it takes time. But they take care of all the paperwork themselves, and secure a means of transport as well. You can also challenge the Labyrinth Beim manages if you really want, but doing that gives you an obligation of sorts to do their request. To put it bluntly, dispatches don’t have many takers.”

Cutting it short at calling it unpopular, the man turned around, and looked at the Guild Branch.

“By the way, this is that very unpopular guild. Ah, also, normal Adventurers never go to the main headquarters, by the way. That’s where all the important folks work.”

I looked at the large headquarters building, but people were flowing in and out the doors without stop.

He pointed to a smokestack atop the branch.

“There’s even a bath in this one. They have their own lodging facilities, so if you’re ever left without an inn, you can sleep here.”

Their facilities did seem well in order.

My honest impression: as expected as the headquarters of adventurers.

A tired Aria, Clara, Shannon, and Eva.

Monica showed no interest, and didn’t bite into the conversation.

Miranda let out a sigh.

“And so? For what reason did you choose to bring us here? If you think over it, you’re pretty much saying that challenging the Labyrinth would be a better use of our time.”

He raised both his hands in playful surrender.

It does appear the commission this man gets isn’t just from the shops.

(I see, so the adventurer guilds themselves also hire these sorts.)

As I nodded in satisfaction, I heard the Fifth’s voice from the Jewel.

『Well, it’s at least good of him to have explained that all beforehand. Of course, I’m sure there’s plenty he hasn’t said as well.』

It was just as the Fifth said.

I waited for the man to continue his explanations.

“It’s not like I’m trying to trick anyone. I’ll properly show you another on the way back. It’s just I have my own inclinations to work with, and the guild’s doing quite a bit on their part.”

Watching his disinterested attitude, the Third let out his voice.

『No, isn’t it fine? Lyle, this branch suits us quite well.』

I gripped the Jewel to signal affirmation.

“… I see. Shall we go back, then? Shannon is at her limit. Can I leave the road back to the inn to you?”

After I voiced my intent to return, the narrow-eyed man nodded with a smile.

I took out two silvers, and handed them over.

“As I thought, I was right to call out to your group. Oh, I forgot the

all-important greeting.”

He gave a wide smile.

“Welcome to the city of adventurers. To Beim.”

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After returning to the inn, with my comrades so worn out, we decided to sleep early.

Dropping by the Jewel, I confirmed it with the Third.

“Why did you recommend that branch?”

With his chin rested atop the round table, the Third spoke in a bothersome tone.

『It’s fine and all to build up strength in a Labyrinth, but your goal isn’t to get stronger, is it? It’s to defeat Celes.』

Wiping off his Glasses, the Fourth joined in the conversation.

『To be honest, there’s pluses and minuses on both sides. But I think it’s best if you chose a guild with a degree of freedom this time. If that doesn’t work out, you can always change branches, right?』

Their reasons seemed to be, that the dispatch branch seemed to have more merits than the others.

The other ancestors weren’t present this time around.

Raising his chin, and putting both hands behind his head, the Third looked at me, and explained the plan.

『Not just Beim, I thought you’d be more free if you worked at a one

that lets you venture out. If it turns out different than what you imagined, then just change it up. At present, we're lacking too much crucial information. So gather some, go outside the walls, and confirm it all yourselves.』

Putting the glasses back on, he took over explanations.

『You'll be moving to gather as many ally forces as possible. And there's no problem if you clear a Labyrinth outside, right? In a managed Labyrinth, they won't let you get the treasure in the innermost chamber. You'll all have to prepare equipment as soon as possible.』

The rare metal that exists in the innermost chambers.

The problem was, that if you took it away, the Labyrinth would cease function.

For that sake, cities that manage labyrinths purposely prevent the clearing of them, reaping profits from the magic stones and materials of their monsters.

The Fourth looked at me.

『People, goods, money… you're lacking in all of them at present. If you want to find a chance to beat her in your current state, you can't be reluctant from here on. Go at it with your all.』

Rather than concealing Skills to do work, it's better you just assertively use them to complete it.

The third stood, and stretched.

『Well then, should we get a start on it?』

Bringing his hand to the back of his neck, the Third began tracing a line around it…

"… I'd like to refrain for today."

I retreated, but the Fourth circled behind, and grasped both my

shoulders.

Turning my head, I saw his glasses were letting off an ominous light, and his lips were smiling.

『Oh isn't it fine? Wonder child of the Walt House, I want to fight against the boy who once held that name. You're going to win against all of us, right?』

I gave an excuse.

"T-that was just because I thought if I couldn't win against the ancestors, I would never be able to win against Celes! I didn't mean it like that!"

I tried my best to escape, but the Third beckoned me closer.

『Hahaha, that excuse ain't gonna work. Now we have plenty of time. Me and the Fourth will take turns fighting you.』

I thought.

(These guys are still holding grudges about it!)

Chapter 2: Men of the Walt House

My breathing was in disarray.

I swung the sabre in my hand, but I never felt the sensation of hitting anything.

The Third Generation I should have cut into was showing a fearless smile.

『How unfortunate. That's the wrong one.』

The moment I heard that, I spun, and held the blade up defensively.

Thrusting out his typical one-handed sword, the Third laughed at my reaction.

『You're fast, but that's no good.』

When the blades were about to lock, my eyes reflexively darted the the left.

For a while now, I had been using the Skills 【All】, 【Map】 and 【Search】 to try detecting him, but I couldn't get a hold on the Third.

Within the Jewel…

In the room of the Fourth's memories, I was cut down by the Third's sword.

It was a straight road that went on without end. Within that scenery only colored by the blue sky expanding over it, my red blood danced through the air.

As I collapsed, I stuck my sabre into the ground, and somehow managed to keep my footing, sending my breathing into even more of a mess.

I did feel pain.

I looked at the place I had been cut, but the blood had already stopped flowing, and not even my clothing was damaged.

Pulling my sabre from the ground, I took my stance.

The Third before my eyes tapped the body of his sword against his right shoulder a number of times as he looked at me.

『You need to use both your Skills and senses. Otherwise, you'll never be able to block, or even react to Celes' attacks.』

Letting out a sigh, he put his hand to his face, but his mouth was ever smiling.

Perhaps they still held some grudges over my proclamation of beating everyone, but all ancestors concerned have gotten quite fired up over training me.

Too fired up, I'd say.

"Reactions from the Skills increase and vanish… and if I see a blade edge approaching, I block on reflex."

The techniques I'd polished up caused me to immediately take a defensive stance based on information gathered from my sense of sight.

But with his ability to interfere with one's psych, and show off illusions, the Third was making full use of that.

The Sabre in my grip disappeared.

His sword vanished in a similar manner.

I watched the nostalgic weapon fade out from my hand.

The sabre the Jewel recreated for me was the one of my childhood; the one my parents had given me as a present.

Once it was gone, I clenched the hand that had been holding it.

The Fourth gave his opinion on mine and the Third's fight.

『Aim for the point beyond subconscious response. But on the path you've chosen Lyle, you'll need the point beyond the beyond… think of it as beyond the wall even masters can't surpass.』

What I've learned from fighting was of Celes' strength and my own.

I understood well enough I wouldn't win at this rate.

But I didn't think I would be this ill-matched against the heads of history.

The Third made a game of me, and I could never get anywhere near the Fourth.

I couldn't raise a hand to the men who'd fully mastered their own Skills.

The Third laughed.

『Good grief. Max, it doesn't suit you to say that with such a somber face. You used to be such an honest and good kid.』

He cleared his throat in objection.

『After you were gone, do you understand that troubles I was put through? And know that I've lived a longer life than you.』

The Fourth asserted he wouldn't lose out in life experience, but watching the two of them, something did come to mind.

"… Come to think of it, what of both of your wives? They're both ancestors to me all the same, but what sort of people were they?"

I had been curious so I asked, but the Fourth frantically corrected the position of his glasses with his index finger in blatant panic.

The Third reminisced…

『My wife? She was a splendid woman. Kind and charming, and she was quite level-headed so she gave of this reliable feeling.』

Ahahaha, he laughed, as he spoke of his memories.

But the Fourth's face had stiffened a bit.

『R-right. My wife was also a s-splendid woman… right.』

It was kinda suspicious, so I focused my eyes on him.

Noticing something, the Third looked around.

『Lyle, watch… the scenery has started to change.』

As the grinning man said, a change was coming about the landscape.

"Ah, I can see a mansion. Could this be…"

The Fourth hung his head.

『Right, it's my mansion. I moved from the previous place, and reconstructed it.』

What we were in was the mansion's courtyard.

The iron-barred gate swung open, and a carriage entered through.

The Fourth exited the mansion with quite a nervous bearing.

But age-wise, he was the same as the one that appeared in the Jewel.

In his early thirties, I'll bet.

The Third…

『Is there an important guest coming? Carriages are entering the court one after another.』

Carriages and carts loaded to the brim with boxes filtered in, and before the Fourth Generation Head, a single girl dismounted, and gave her greetings.

No matter how you looked at it, she was in her early teens. A little girl that gave off quite a strong-willed impression.

Covering his face with both hands, the Fourth explained.

『… That's my wife.』

Both me and the Third approached the so-called wife's face, and looked back and forth between the couple a few times.

Watching the girl turn her back to him, the Fourth made quite a cramped smile as he heard her introduce herself as his bride.

『Nice to meet you, we've exchanged letters for some time, but I'm Max Walt. I'm happy we've gotten the opportunity to meet.』

Observing the Fourth's pleasantries, the wife…

『… Twenty points.』

『Huh?』

Giving a grade, the girl put both hands on her hips, and looked up at the man older than her with her chest pushed out. She began boldly lecturing him.

『Small as I may be, I'm a girl bearing the name of a Viscount House. Don't make light of me as a child! And what is this supposed to be!? Did you perhaps assume me the companion of your bride or something?』

Little girl… his wife chastised him on his action of constantly confirming the area behind her, sending the Fourth into a panic.

『My apologies. But you were just so cute I couldn't help but doubt my fortune.』

As he said that with a gentle smile, she…

『Ten points. From the moment I married in, I was no longer a girl, but your wife. I'd appreciate it you didn't take me for a child.』

She seemed quite a harsh one.

But no matter how you took it in, it was the scene of a daughter scolding her own father.

The Third was on all fours, laughing as he tapped the ground.

『As expected of Max-san…!』

"Fourth Generation, I apologize. I can't help but laugh at this one."

Both me and the Third laughed as we looked at the Fourth's wife.

There, his glasses caught a strange light as he spoke to us.

『… Remember this, Lyle.』

"What is it?"

I was repenting over laughing a bit too much, but the scene hadn't stopped, and the girl continued giving the man low grades, so the Third was rolling on the floor.

『The Walt Family Precepts… you remember the bride requirements, right?』

I nodded with a doubtful face.

I mean, they're just something the First said while drunk, and were thought of as real precepts for over two hundred years to follow.

To put it simply…

【A woman to be welcomed as a wife must, first of all, have a

superior appearance.】
【Second, be healthy.】
【Third, have a sturdy body.】
【Fourth, have a good head on her shoulders】
【Fifth, have nice skin.】
【Sixth, must excel in magic.】

… It is taboo to state that the second and third clauses overlap. They're the nonsense of a drunkard, so I'm sure they weren't said with much thought in the first place. So they were later interpreted as follows. The last one alone was something added on by the Fifth, and the First was completely irrelevant.

Excellent appearance.
Does not get sick.
Durable body.
High intelligence.
Nice Skin.
A real noble able to use Magic.

Those were the Walt House's bride-finding Precepts.

There hasn't been a case where a son wasn't born, so the female version… the groom-finding Precepts don't exist.

The Fourth laughed in disdain.

『Welcoming in a proficient wife. I see, that surely is important. Perhaps it's accurate to say the ones who've shaped the current Walt House, aren't us, but our wives.』

Watching the Third roll around on the ground, I got the impression that was probably correct.

The Fourth of memories was being judged for having nothing more tasteful to say.

With shadows in his smile, the current Fourth spoke.

『My wife was excellent. A different sort of excellence than mother

had. She was level-headed, and the reason the Walt House that had just become a Baron House could develop into true nobility was because of her. Strong-lipped and harsh, but she had some cute sides to her. It's true, you know? Just to put it out there, she was filled to the brim with cute parts! That adorable figure is one thing, but…』

Why did the Fourth look so pitiful as he desperately grasped for straws?

"D-does that mean the other ancestors had scenes like these spread out before them?"

To change the topic, I tried turning the conversation to the other ancestors.

『While there may be a few differences, I'm sure we rolled around in their palms quite nicely. That's just how men of the Walt House are! Ah, but… perhaps the Fifth was different.』

On the Fourth's words…

(… No, even if you make a dramatic pose as you say, 'we men of the Walt House are destined to play about on the palms of our wives' hands,' that doesn't make me happy or anything.)

The scenery turned gray, and the scene changed to one within a room of the mansion. The rolling Third hit his head against a wall, and started holding it.

『Hey… don't change the channel all of a sudden.』

『You reaped what you sew.』

Rubbing his head, the Third answered the Fourth with a smile.

In the room, a Fifth Generation in his early twenties was introduced to a single woman by a gray-streaked Fourth, and his wife of blossoming age.

Nervous, the Fifth let few words from his mouth.

『What's wrong, Fredricks? Ah, I got it. Your partner is such a beauty that you can't help but be nervous.』

Still as strong-willed as ever, the Fourth's wife sent a sweet face to the Fifth.

To her side, the grey-streaked Fourth gave a complaint.

『Can't you say something more tasteful?』

His wife pinched his arm with a smile.

『Dear, are you saying you have some complaints with Fredricks?』

『None! I don't have any, so please stop!』

Before the lady who was giggling to herself, the young Fifth gave a simple greeting.

『I'm Fredricks. I'm not that good with jokes.』

『Is that so? I'm…』

As the woman went on with her introduction, the Fifth continued making an apologetic face. Only the Fourth and his wife persisted to try to make the two of them get along.

Both me and the Third couldn't keep a straight face at that one.

I mean, as history tells, what followed was the Fifth getting four mistresses, and fathering close to thirty children.

Rather than a step forwards, it was problematic behavior that lit the spark for many conflicts in the making.

The scene lost its color, and the Fourth let out a sigh.

『Fredricks… the one the Fifth married was also a good kid who passed the precepts.』

Preparing mistresses even despite that, the Fifth seemed to be quite doted on by the Fourth's wife.

The Fourth removed his glasses, and began wiping them off.

『The Fifth… Fredricks was an honest boy, always smiling. Looking back, I really wonder when he stopped smiling altogether.』

The Fifth prioritized efficiency, and he gave the coldest impression of any of the ancestors.

But at the same time, he was the one endured the most.

As generations to come would know him, a lustful man surrounded by beautiful women.

A merciless man who cut down bandits and mercenaries without hesitation.

Say what you will.

He did live in one of the darkest times of the House. And the Sixth followed along that flow, with the times finally changing in the Seventh's time. That was the history of the House I had heard from my father.

The Third put his hands behind his head, and looked at the Fifth in the colorless scenery.

『Well, I'll bet he could see quite a bit. So he put it all to practice. He probably thought it necessary, but why did you leave such a need?』

Our eyes pierced into the Fourth.

Putting the glasses back, he stared at the stopped time; at the smiling face of his unmoving wife.

『… An accident. She got injured, and couldn't birth any more children. I never told Fredricks.』

Quietly…

『I see.』

Chapter 3: East Branch

We had spent our first day in Beim sightseeing with a guide.

He told us of where the shops we might have to use were, and of which ones were popular in Beim, but he also informed us of the places it best we don't stop by.

Of course, it's not like we were able to see everything on the list in one day.

As the basics for adventurers in general, he introduced us to the Guild, armories, food shops, inns, and realtors.

While in Beim, spending time in a poorly placed inn would become a pain.

It would also rack up quite an expense.

Unless one went solo- or had a small enough party- and earned extraordinary compensation for single requests, constant inn life is a dream within a dream.

For those of mercenary brigade scale, they sometimes built up their own strongholds within the city.

Due to varying circumstance I won't say this as a definite, but for any wishing to set Beim as their home guild for a long period of time, inn costs would only pile up to something awful.

No matter the sum we earned, there was equipment maintenance and renewal, and daily expenses that all added up.

Even adventurers retired as they grew older.

For that sake, having savings was a necessity.

Meaning a real estate agency was also a necessity for the trade.

Heading to Beim's 【East Branch】with our party of eight, we found ourselves mildly amazed at the busy citizens moving about so early in the morning.

Centralle also had a lot of people, and it had its own sort of business to it. Compared to Beim, I now saw the capital as a quiet place.

Arumsaas was the same, but there it was Students of the academy leaving their homes early to commute.

Dalien was of small scale, and it had some energy to it, but compared to Beim the difference was all too clear.

The figures of numerous adventurers headed to the Guilds… I heard the eastern branch was the dispatch one, and had fewer adventurers assigned to it, but was that really the case? As I thought that…

"Hey, about that group over there…"

Aria called out, so we turned our eyes to the direction she was looking.

A well-equipped party was headed for the guild.

From their equipment and the way they walked, I couldn't see them as any ordinary adventurers. The trade was one that called for light-weight gear, and they were making use of heavy metal armor.

Aria…

"How imposing. Could they be mercenaries?"

Their numbers totaled in the twenties, with adder support personnel following behind.

I could definitely imagine them as a small scale mercenary brigade.

But a voice from the Jewel refuted that. It was the Fifth.

『They're knights from somewhere. Not Bahnseim… does a country of adventurers hire on knights as well?』

It wasn't just the Fifth to question it.

The Fourth too…

『It truly is unnatural. Of course, the country's policy is different than our own, so I can't really say anything to it.』

In Bahnseim, it wasn't looked on as favorable if a knight took up adventuring on the side.

Because it wasn't possible to get rid of the negative image stuck to the work.

There, Miranda tapped my shoulder with a finger.

I turned to see a tall, yawning woman headed off in a similar fashion.

That woman was being avoided by those around her.

"Somehow, all the adventurers that catch the eye here are quite amazing. Those that'd usually be called the rare elites are littered all over the place."

On Miranda's words, I observed my surroundings. There really were a large number of competent ones.

Quite a few that gave off a different air than the others.

Walking nearby, Clara took care not to strike any passersby with her oversized staff.

The ground was one of neatly interlocking stone, and the sound of scraping metal and countless footsteps made it hard to hear each other.

"There are many adventurers in general, so perhaps it appears that way. Of course, it may be exactly because such adventurers are here, that all the requests gather in Beim."

Did requests gather because of the adventurers, or adventurers for the requests… with that on my mind, I noticed some sort of ruckus breaking out ahead.

Others that noticed the quarrel walked around it without stopping.

One side was a group that looked to be made of young adventurers, and the other was a group led by a bearded man in his thirties.

His beard and features gave him quite a villainous face. And now why would new adventurers get involved with someone like that…?

“After running head-into us, ‘sorry’ is the only word you’ve got to say!? Looking down on us just because we’re newcomers to Beim!?”

The young adventurer with a large sword on his back wore nothing but a tank top on his upper body. However, his hips were covered in metal protectors all around, and his boots were tipped with steel.

He wore quite some unbalanced equipment, but the ones following him around were quite normal, or how should I put this… they didn’t have proper equipment to begin with.

Thinking back to where I’d seen him before, I recalled him as the one shouting out when first arrived at the gate.

His skin was a healthily tanned brown, and his muscle was formidable. However, the villainous one he was picking a fight with was the same.

He looked to be accustomed to using and maintaining his equipment.

More than that, his arms were thicker than the young man… his body trained, and the comrades he brought along were all wearing suitable equipment.

“… What’s with this situation?”

On the contrary, I found it quite intriguing, but seeing the scene,

Shannon scoffed.

“If they fight, those guys’ll be killed off within the minute.”

Eva confirmed it with her.

“Eh? So is the one with the large sword stronger? I kinda want to see it out.”

Novem shook her head.

“It’s the opposite. He’s the one who’ll fall instantly. While the one with the sword seems quite competent… his comrades are…”

Just from their gear, they were worlds apart.

I could only look on in wonder as I tried to fathom why they acted up so much.

The bearded adventurer apologized.

“I really am sorry. I wasn’t paying attention on my side. I’ve properly given my apologies, so is it fine if we go on our way? You all have business with the guild as well, don’t you?”

He really didn’t want to be involved.

I quickly realized why he didn’t speak of pride or anything of the sort.

The surrounding adventurers….

“How lively, so early in the morning.”
“Assertiveness is a good thing. It all goes flat once you’ve lived long enough.”
“After setting out for the guild so early, they end up losing time in a place like this? My deepest condolences.”

As the nearby adventurers were saying as such, I’m sure they only thought of it on the level of a minor unlucky happening.

Anywhere else, it wouldn't be strange for a fight to break out here and now.

We also avoided the strife to make our way to the Guild, but the adventurer with the large sword suddenly turned to us.

His eyes were focused on the outfit of a maid. When I looked at Monica, she purposefully put both of her hands to her face, and blushed.

"God, what's gotten in to you in such a place? If you want to partake in my love, please make it when we're alone, or…"

"… What happened to your robe?"

She stood out, so I told her to wear one, but she had taken it off.

She shrugged off the question.

"The surrounding adventurers and civilians didn't actually seem to care too much, so I took it off. I mean, I take quite a bit of pride in my uniform. I can't just go about concealing it with a robe, and I didn't see the need to begin with."

I have nothing but questions for those damn ancients.

The bearded adventurer's group turned curiously to where the large sworded man was looking.

I took Monica's hand, and swiftly left the area.

When I gripped her, she…

"Just like this, a flight of love."

"If you want to take flight from reality, then do it whenever you want! Now let's get going already."

It was a tone that would raise complaints, but if we stayed where we were, I'm sure we would have been dragged into something strange.

Seeing that, the Fourth spoke.

『With so many sorts of adventurers, it seems like an interesting place.』

The Sixth was…

『I wonder what sort of guild this one will be. I pray it isn't one like Arumsaas'.』

The Third.

『The guide said it was mainly to train, but what's that supposed to mean? Well, that's the fun to come, I guess.』

There, behind me, even further back than the adventurer with the large sword.

I heard a tremendous voice.

"Albano! You again!?"

"Oy, oy, don't make this one my fault dammit, Creit-san!"

I thought.

(It really is lively here, or how should I put it…)

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The Guild on the east side of Beim was, quite straightforwardly, known as the 【East Branch】.

The building it occupied was a large one, and in its bulk it held lodging facilities and functional baths.

Seeing how complete their services for adventurers were, I could understand just how much profits they were reaping from the enterprise

The east guild's receptions desk was divided by purpose.

There was an entire counter set aside for home-change requests, and newcomer applications.

A warehouse building to take battle spoils over to was prepared separately, and the receptions desks were on the first floor. Perhaps this was one of the characteristics of the city.

Signboards were posted around the vast hall, alongside a map of the building. On them, for those visiting Beim, the eastern guild for the first time… there were simple directions laid out for those moving to the east branch, or becoming adventurers for the first time.

"New recruitments and home change relations are… the second floor."

From the entrance plagued by intense traffic, we started walking towards the second floor.

There were plenty of adventurers seeking home changes like us.

Many who wanted to become adventurers of Beim.

As we ascended the stairs, fleeting eyes began to gather on us.

(… Well, I guess there's no helping it.)

What drew them may have been the fact everyone in the party besides me was female. What's more, one was still a child, another a maid… if someone asked what sort of gathering we were, I get the feeling the answer 'street performer' would pass.

(Ah, I think we could actually survive on street performing…)

When I looked at Eva the elf, she tilted her head.

I noticed that the stares could be divided largely into two groups.

Envy for the women, and pity for me.

I heard the Third's voice from the Jewel.

『Looks like you're popular, no matter where you go.』

He said that with deep sarcasm, so I tapped the Jewel to deny it.

And reaching the second floor's reception, I found a line had already formed.

Behind the organized counters, receptionists were given detailed explanations to the adventurers.

All employees were wearing the same uniform as they dealt with their clients.

The Seventh…

『They've put quite some money into this one. I'd never ventured to Beim, but… how should I put this, I imagined a much harsher environment.』

I held the same opinion.

From what I heard, the city was supposed to be one brimming with danger.

Perhaps it's just the first day, and I have yet to understand anything, but that being the case, the atmosphere was completely different from what I had anticipated.

While I was searching out the counter dealing with home transfer processes, a staff member called out.

"Home changes are over here."

"Ah, many thanks. There sure are a lot of people here."

I gave a light greeting, and tried to start up some idle banter. The receptionist gave a bitter smile.

“Beim has a considerable population, and there’re always more coming in than out. A while back, the counters were narrow, and it took some time to do all the paperwork.”

After I handed the seven pairs of guild cards to her, the receptionist turned to Monica.

I sighed, and…

“That one isn’t a human. She’s an automaton.”

The receptionist woman held my card out over a device. I didn’t really know what she was doing, but she nodded a few times as she looked at it.

“There’s been a bit of break in your activity, but it looks like you’ve been in Arumsaas. I never thought I’d be able to see an automaton so soon.”

It does appear that word has already reached from Arumsaas. She began to explain.

“There are very few who venture from Beim to Arumsaas, but the other way has its numbers. And Professor Damien is quite a famous one here too. Seeking the baggage carrying robots he is producing… Porter, we’ve only recently had a stream of people going to Arumsaas at all. It really is amazing. I wonder what sort of man the professor is. Do you know him?”

I decided to smile with an ambiguous smile on my face.

(So even Porter’s known here? That was fast.)

To the curious woman, I…

“Yep, he’s a… good person. A bit of a strange one, though.”

Hearing that, she nodded with delight.

“You’re an acquaintance of Professor Damien? Ah, but he is a famous one there as well, so perhaps it is not a marvel for you to know of him… ah, right, the paperwork.”

As the receptionist hurried on with the forms, the voice of a fed-up Fourth…

『Well it wasn’t a lie. He was a good person to Lyle, at least. I mean, he taught him magic and gave him an Automaton after all.』

The Third laughed.

『That sleeping beauty was the best. But wasn’t the ‘bit of a strange one’ part a lie? That one’s a full-blown pervert.』

I decided to ignore the voices from the Jewel.

After confirming the seven guild cards, she took charge of one of each pair.

And after we finished registering as a party, she handed the other ones back to us.

“And that is the end of it. There will be an explanation as to the format of Beim’s guild, so perhaps it is best you all partake. It will take place in the inner room. I assume there is much you don’t know, as you’ve only just changed homes. I do think there is a fair share of differences from the other guilds, so I really do think it best you partake.”

Accepting everyone’s cards, I nodded.

From the force of her insistence, I guess there are some adventurers who choose not to undergo it.

And so we headed to the inner room, and found a wide assortment of adventurers who’d changed their homes already assembled.

Nearby the conference room-like area, I heard a familiar voice from the meeting for complete newcomers nearby.

It was that of the man with the large sword.

I tried to focus on the guild speaker's words…

(So he came to Beim to become an adventurer? That's some courage there.)

I thought starting up in Beim would be too rough, so I had chosen to build up some experience elsewhere.

But I really wonder what caused him to shout out in an introductory meeting.

(And wait, I seem to be running into him quite a lot.)

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After the explanatory meeting had finished, we went back down to the first floor.

Everyone's expression held more dissatisfaction than I expected.

Especially Aria…

"Hey… what's that supposed to mean? That they'll assign requests on their part?"

The main reason for that discontentment was the fact we couldn't select jobs on our own.

Requests entered into the guild in too great a number.

And even if they found one with favorable conditions, the adventurers of Beim weren't able to freely select them on their own.

Novem tried to soothe Aria.

“There’s no helping it. There are too many requests, that a system of us selecting would… I’m sure there wouldn’t be anything like before, where we could just take up a request no other adventurer had decided to do.”

If the conditions weren’t that favorable, then an adventurer wouldn’t take up the request.

The guild also tried to ensure such requests weren’t put out to begin with, but occasionally some questionable ones would come out.

Clara looked at Aria.

“It’s just that after adventurers have a certain level of experience, they choose not to take up odd jobs, so it usually works out, right? The problem is that this one is specialized to dispatch requests.”

My comrades’ eyes gathered on me.

Dispatch meant we’d be moving to lands apart from Beim.

And in that case, we’d lose whatever time it’d take to migrate.

I cleared my throat.

“No, look… our goal isn’t adventuring, but Celes after all. If this one turns out no good, I thought it would be fine if we transferred to the west branch.”

On my opinion, Monica promptly…

“Three months at minimum, was it? They said there was a limitation on home transfers within the city, did they not?”

To decrease the ease of transferring post, a restriction had been placed.

Shannon…

“And they even said we have to periodically complete requests. Seriously, what’s the meaning of all of this?”

I honestly…

“… I was a little naïve in my thoughts. I’m sorry.”

As I apologized, Eva spoke.

“Huh? Is it really that strange? I don’t know too much about adventurers, but I’ve heard that the system usually does change based on one’s home.”

She fiddled with her hair as she spoke, so Miranda explained.

“This guild is going to push jobs onto us. We’ll have to alter our plans and preferences, and it will be rough on the sorts of adventurers that don’t usually take up formal requests.”

If it was just challenging the Labyrinth the city managed, then there would be no problems if we didn’t take one up.

But the Fifth…

『You’ve yet to take up a single request, or make a coin in Beim, right? Isn’t it better you make a decision after giving it a go? If you really do find it unbearable, then change homes as soon as you can, and that’s all there is to it.』

Quite a constructive opinion.

“Well let’s set this as our home for a while, and see how work goes. If we keep denying it without doing anything, we won’t get anywhere.”

As I said that, Clara nodded.

“That’s right. Perhaps we may find some benefit to this system.”

Eva…

“There are still adventurers who use this one as their home, so there’s no saying there’s nothing to it, right? Though the story would be different if there was a reason they simply couldn’t transfer.”

It was a guild more troublesome than I had imagined.

That on my mind, I heard a voice call at to me.

“Oy!”

I turned around to find the man with the large sword behind me.

“Me?”

“That’s right! Aren’t you a little too stuck up?”

I was puzzled over why I ran into him so much, but I didn’t think he’d call out to me of his own accord.

And judging by the atmosphere he gave off, I was not being dealt with on friendly terms.

Behind the man, his comrades were looking… at all my party besides me.

A voice came from the Jewel.

It was the third.

『Ah! So that’s it. A gathering of beauties does make one a bit jealous.』

The Fourth was amazed.

『What? And jealousy makes one shout like that? This kid’s an interesting one.』

The Fifth’s voice sounded irritated.

『I hate these sorts. Adventurers of a certain level won’t get into

others' business, but he's a newbie, is he… these types really irritate me.』

The Sixth laughed.

『It's the express right of youth! The fruitless desires of reckless men. Isn't that fine?』

The Seventh disinterestedly…

『You can fine these types anywhere you look. Just ignore him. Don't get yourself involved.』

They all gave out their opinions, and following the Seventh's advice, I gave a vague smile and tried to leave.

"Is that so? Then I'll take it to heart. Now let's get going, everyone."

I tried leading my comrades out, and felt him grasp my shoulder.

His grip was strong enough to let out a grating sound, and I narrowed my eyes to glare at him.

He had a smile across his mouth. The Second's Skill informed me he was using a Skill himself.

(Is he amplifying his power? Vanguard? Support's a possibility.)

I kept it short.

"That hurts, you know?"

As I said that, he…

"And so? All the folks here are cowards. I've tried so many times to gauge my skill level here, but no one will take me on. You're an outsider, right? Then play with me a little. Then I'll be able to understand what sort of thing adventurers are."

He was taking some fleeting glances at Novem and the rest. The fact he was overly conscious of them was quite obvious.

Inferring the situation, the eyes of others began to gather.

And…

“Hold it right there! Personal matters between adventurers are forbidden here!”

A tall young man with all of his black hair swept to the back stepped between us.

The adventurer with the large sword…

“Who are you supposed to be?”

So the tall young man named himself.

Straightening his back, the polite-looking man gave a proper introduction.

“My name is 【Creit Venini】. I am currently working here as an adventurer. As a fellow adventurer, I can’t overlook these personal quarrels!”

The man gave quite a hot-blooded impression.

Thinking I was saved, I put my hand to my chest, and…

“Therefore, you should hold a formal duel. Use your skills and technique to compete fair and square!”

I raised my face in surprise, to catch a glimpse of Creit making an expression that pretty much said, ‘I always wanted to say that.’

“Eh? Duel? Eh!?”

Seeing my surprise, the adventurer with the large sword…

“Perfect, I’ll take it up. I’m 【Erhart Baumann】. It’ll leave a bad taste in my mouth to kill off such a frail looking kid anyways.”

He was full on board, so I turned to my own companions.

Aria and Miranda.

“Hey, just have at it already.”

“Isn’t it fine? If it’s a duel, then no one’s going to die. If you get injured, I’ll heal you right up… with uninterrupted service.”

Clara and Shannon…

“This sort of story book development is a little thrilling. They’re all over the place in novels, but nobody does that sort of thing these days, so it’s a bit exciting.”

“That sort of duel over a woman thing? I don’t really read much, so I can’t see the point.”

“No, I mean the essential plot point where an adventurer ends up picking a fight with a veteran. Don’t you find it strangely appealing?”

“Not particularly, and doesn’t that make Lyle the villain in this case?”

… They were having fun.

Thinking it was just a fight between newcomers, and perhaps because the young man had recommended a dual so grandiosely, others were looking our way, and smiling.

Eva…

“It’s kinda like Lyle’s that! He’s got that sort of luck! But when you’re telling a tale, I think these sorts of developments are important! Accept by all means!”

She’s telling me to fight for the sole sake of her song.

Monica even…

“I want to see the Chicken Dickwad’s cool parts~.”

She sung that out, and let her twin tails twitch up and down.

(Her voice is clear, and she sounds strangely skilled, so it just makes it all the more irritating!)

Novem made a troublesome expression.

“Um, please make sure you don’t injure your opponent too much.”

For her to worry about my opponent, I do think it’s a kind and wonderful thing to do. But can’t she try to get me out of this?

I heard laughing voices from the Jewel.

The ancestors in order…

『He’s sure got it! Lyle’s definitely got it! It’s like this wherever he goes!』
『People rarely ever pick fights like that anymore. This may actually be interesting.』
『Yeah, there’s surprisingly little of this sort of thing among adventurers. Well, if you can beat the hell out of him, then just do it.』
『It’s getting heated, Lyle!』
『He does seem to be a Skill user, so I’m sure it will be a good experience. Good for you, Lyle.』

I shook my head as I thought.

(Why is it that instead of even trying to stop it, everyone seems to be having fun?)

Chapter 4: Adventurers

Among the facilities of the guild, there was a room for training.

That room surrounded by walls of tidy stone held a bit of a heavy air. While a small window had been installed, I doubt that served for sufficient ventilation.

I held up a wooden mockup of a sabre. The young man with his hair swept back, Creit, stood between me and my opponent Erhart.

Around were my comrades, and that of the large-sworded Erhart.

And perhaps they were curious, and other adventurers gathered in clusters as well.

Those that had returned from their quests were one thing, but some who had just come to the guild were watching us and grinning.

Straining my ears, I could hear their conversations.

"Wanna bet on who'll come out on top?"
"Still, while you hear about them all the time, first I'm ever seeing a duel."
"It's nice to be young, recklessness and all."
"So what was the reason for all this again?"
"No matter how you look at it, that guy over there has a harem, right? Isn't that why?"
"Yes, it's a marvel to the eyes, but quite a different experience."
"Ah~ youth. But it's interesting, so so be it."
"I'm betting on blue hair over there!"
"But I heard green hair has a Skill, it seems."

… They were enjoying it.

Harsh on newbies, veteran adventurers who would pick fights if you went to register at the guild… such adventurers did not exist.

But an adventurer of my own generation was picking one all the same.

(Why did it come to this? Yes, I was leading around Novem and the others, but I'm sure I should have been able to avoid it…)

Looking behind, Clara's eyes were sparkling. Eva was the same, but for some reason she had a memo pad.

And in this place that reeked of sweat, Shannon was making an unpleasant face as she drank something from a canteen.

Novem was preparing some magic to try and vent the place, while Aria and Miranda waved when I turned their way.

Looking to the front, Creit-san was talking to someone in a guild uniform who had emerged from the ring of adventurers.

"… I understand the reason for this duel. A quarrel between young adventurers, right? But I ask that you don't do this sort of thing too often."

Her hair black and bob cut, the sharp red eyes of the guild employee tiredly shifted between me and Erhart.

And…

"The details have been acknowledged. Promise that none will voice any complaints at the outcome to come. And this is just to decide a victor and loser. Wagering something on this battle is strictly prohibited."

She looked around at the surrounding adventurers.

"While I'm at it, you all should make sure not to get too heated over your bets."

The veterans smiled, and spoke to her.

"We're only playing, 【Tanya】-chan. Let it slide, won't you?"

It appears the female employee fed up with all of this was called 【Tanya】.

Creit-san hit his right hand against his chest.

“No worries there. I will personally stand witness! I’ll make sure both sides are satisfied with the result!”

Erhart laughed as he held up the wooden sword replacing his giant one.

It was quite an unreasonable match for me, but no one present would be satisfied it I put a stop to it here. And he really was a Skillholder after all.

“I surely don’t have enough experience fighting Skillholders.”

Tanya mingled into the adventurer crowd, while Creit stepped back a little and gave a signal.

He was looking at me, likely waiting for me to get into a stance.

With my wooden sabre held up, Creit…

“Begin!”

His loud voice echoed through the room, and some cheerful cheers rose.

“This is totally different from the guild I had imagined.”

As I let out a complaint, my opponent raised his sword overhead, and lowered it at me.

(He’s formally learned the sword?)

Seeing how he handles the large sword-replica, I got the impression he had learned it somewhere. He had given a surname, so perhaps he was the child of some noble somewhere.

Or perhaps just an environment where he could pick it up…

I turned half my body to dodge, and let out a thrust, hitting his arm

with the tip of my wooden sword.

But It felt hard.

I wasn't able to put too much power into that attack, but his arm didn't turn red at all.

A cheerful Sixth from the Jewel…

『There's body strengthening in Vanguard and Support… having a Skill at his age, and being able to use it at a moment's notice. I see, there's at least some reason to his assertiveness.』

As he swung his blade horizontally, I retreated to dodge, and felt some wind pressure as it passed. While he had some extent of technique hammered into his body, his movements themselves weren't that fast.

He was using a Skill, but I can't say it was a threat.

"Quit scurrying around! Take this!"

I jumped to avoid his diagonal slash, and blocked the followup strike with my sword only to have a kick instantly delivered to me.

Sent a ways back, I found myself closer to the audience.

"That all? Adventurers are nothing special. I've only used the first one so far."

The Third was delighted.

『He's volunteering information all of his own accord… what a good kid! A second stage, you think he has a third? Why not try asking, Lyle?』

Rather than truly enjoying it… he seemed to be making a fool of him.

Amazed, I…

"So you have a second stage? That sure sounds scary. But if that's all you have to you, it'll work out one way or another."

Offended, Erhart put his large sword over his shoulder, and bragged.

“Who the hell said second? I can use it all the way to the third.”

“Well how courteous of you!”

I closed the distance, and entered the space in front of his sword. He tried to protrude his fist, but I grabbed that arm, and twisted it around to his back.

The surrounding voices…

“What? That’s it?”
“It’s because he undid his stance when he bragged! Dammit, my silver!”
“Hmph, I’m getting some good drink tonight.”

When voices rose at the premature ending, Erhart pushed his remaining arm against the ground. His atmosphere had changed.

“Making a fool of me!?”

The muscle of his arm had expanded, and as I saw an illusion of mana gushing out from his body, I instantly released him and took some distance.

Muscle enhancement.

I thought it was a skill of the same sort as Aria’s, and it seems I was right. While it may have been made of wood, his was mimicking the shape of his great sword, and quite heavy. But his singlehandedly swung it down on me with great force.

Is this the second, or the final stage?

The Fourth…

『If you try blocking that, your sword will break. It’s best you keep dodging, but simple Skills have simple effects… simply strong can be quite troublesome.』

The First's Skill… as a Support Skill, its simplicity was truly effective. In contrast to a Skill that simply strengthened one's muscles, the First's raised the effectiveness of one's abilities in itself.

I mulled over whether or not to use it, but decided not to.

"Oraaaah!"

As he chased after me, swinging his sword left and right, I jumped into his chest area, and slid through his widened legs. Trying to hit me as a passed, Erhart slashed strongly at the ground, and smashed his wooden sword to pieces.

"Don't you ever get tired of running about!? Oy, toss over my【Gramr】"

Tossing aside the broken shaft, he called for his comrades to toss over his blade with quite an exaggerated name.

One of his comrades tossed the blade, but as it sailed in the air, it was hit down by a rock, and sent spinning towards the area with the other adventurers.

The one who picked it up, went to return it to his party and…

"Oy, oy, if he used something like this, they'd both have to resign. Just look at those girlies over there."

I also took a quick glance at my comrades, before immediately turning away.

Miranda dropped the large rock in her hand, and drew one of the daggers at her waist. Aria and the others were all sending menacing glares.

(… I-I'm not scared. They're not scary at all.)

Erhart and his comrades turned quite pale on seeing their movements. I don't even want to know what they had in mind when they picked this fight.

But perhaps this was different from what he had in mind, as Erhart was quite flustered.

“D-dammit! Then fists it is!”

As he rushed at me with his fists out, I repeated a series of thrusts with my sabre. This time, I aimed for his joints, and managed to hit them quite precisely.

If he had Skills, I determined there wouldn’t be a problem if it hurt a bit, so I put my all into it…

“C-coward! If you’re a man, then fight with your fists!”

“Who’s the idiot that tried to settle this with a real sword!?”

Even if it was just a wooden sword, he was unable to find a gap to get through, and he screamed out. The surroundings were full of smiles and laughter.

“That newbie’s gonna make it big!”
“He came back like a boomerang!”
“Now then, how long is he going to hold up, that shameless one?”

Erhart’s body strengthening was enough to endure my attacks. He resolved himself for the pain and attacked, but as his movements were quite obvious, I dodged them quite easily, and hit the wooden sword into him.

All beat up, he continued to stand against me.

Fed up, the Fifth let out his voice.

『I understand that he’s tough, but that’s the end of it. Lyle, aim for the chin.』

That on my mind, I faced him head-on, and he spread his arms in an attempt to grasp me.

As he lunged in, I kicked the ground, and sent my knee into his jaw.

It was quite a clean blow. Erhart's eyes swam as he swayed on his feet and collapsed.

He desperately tried to stand, but his body was not listening to his orders. His swelled muscle mass returned to normal, and Erhart let go of his consciousness.

Seeing that, Creit-san declared.

"Winner Lyle! By this, the duel has come to a close."

Erhart's comrades raced over. The large sword had been returned, and one of them had it over their back.

The large blade called Gramr wasn't a magic tool. It was just a normal sword. Its name alone was grandiose, so I looked at Erhart.

"He swung it with strengthened muscles. I see, that could be troublesome."

I can understand why he put up a strong front. I mean he was quite simply strong.

If he was more bountiful in experience, and more masterful of his Skills, it may have been a harder fight.

Creit-san approached, and struck up a conversation with me.

"Now then, you're the victor so let's call it a close. This matter is water under the bridge."

He said that with a nice s mile, but if he hadn't gotten between us in the first place, I wouldn't have even taken Erhart on in the first place.

My face stiffened, and Novem and the others approached.

"Lyle-sama, good work."

"Eh? Was it really?"

Clara seemed satisfied.

“Duels between adventurers are where ability is put to the test. It’s nice to read about it, but seeing it in person is exceedingly thrilling.”

Eva sounded unsatisfied.

“… If they let him use a real one there, it would’ve been more exciting.”

I…

“Oy, that would be dangerous. And before considering excitement, I think there’s something more important to pay mind to.”

I looked over Erhart as I said that, and one of his comrades glared at me.

“Don’t screw with me. Remember this, we’ll definitely get re-”

I’m sure he was going to say ‘revenge’ but due to the spear that suddenly extended before his face, he didn’t let out another word.

The one holding it was Creit-san.

“This duel held the condition of having no grudges left behind. If you plan on laying hands on anyone, your opponent will be me- the witness- as well.”

Erhart’s comrades retreated, so Creit-san withdrew his spear, and undid his stance. He held it over his shoulder and spoke to me.

“You seem accustomed to battle. You’re quite a skilled adventurer. And your comrades are of high quality as well.”

He looked at the rest of my party, and put his hand to his chin.

“I’m sure a time will arise where we’ll be working together, so how about we get along? Anyways, welcome to the east branch.”

On those words, a laugh rang out.

Creit-san's expression changed, and he glared at the voice's owner.

"Albano!"

The adventurer named Albano was a young man with short blond hair, and blue drooping eyes. He had a sword with a characteristically long hilt hung at his waist.

He had a few silver coins clenched in his hand, as he looked at me.

"I've made a bit off of you, blue haired bro, so I'll warn you. Be careful of that straight laced Creit- over there. If you work with him, he's loud about schedules, and he doesn't know the meaning of flexibility. I'm Albano. If there's a chance for us to work together, I'll be in your care."

Saying that, he followed the other adventurers out the room. Watching his back, Creit-san spoke.

"… Be careful of him. His skills are good, but he's a crafty one. He's made me bite the bullet enough times to know that."

Seeing Creit-san's irritated expression, I gave a vague nod.

(Somehow, Beim's guild has some questionable characters.)

Unlike the guilds I'd worked in up to now, I was nervous over whether I'd be able to make it here.

Chapter 5: Fighting with Skills

With the match over, I was called by a guild personnel to the counter to receive a simple explanation.

Naturally, we weren't the first adventurers who'd worked up a ruckus on their first days at the east branch.

I had my dissatisfactions, but from the guild's point of view, there wasn't the option of doing absolutely nothing to me.

As a representative of the party, I sat across from the guild receptionist, 【Tanya】.

My other comrades with resting a café lounge in the guild called the rest area. I doubt there was anything important enough to call all eight of us out.

The slender Tanya sent me some fed-up glances as she finished up the report documents.

I heard that Erhart was carried off to the medical facilities, and was to receive a severe reprimand after resting a while.

"Yes, it does seem that the fault lies in the other party. And the fact that you were dragged into the mess is something I've managed to confirm."

If so, then why must I be reprimanded? With that sentiment, I tried protesting.

"Then the strict reprimand I'm to receive is…"

"Still happening."

Saying that quite bluntly, Tanya-san finished up the report, put it aside, and cleaned off her desk top.

It seems she was an orderly person. Raising the right side of her glasses to reset their positioning, she went into cautioning me.

“One of your party members is wearing highly conspicuous clothing. An automaton, was it? It’s a fact that her appearance is one to draw the eyes. There are few who would try to pick a fight within the guild like Erhart-kun, but there’s always at least a set amount of adventurers ready to resort to unsavory means. What’s more, I’m referring not to inexperienced ones, but competent veterans.”

It seems that ill-meaning adventurers existed in fixed quantity.

But in the morning rush, I really couldn’t feel many of those sorts.

That was because most of their active work took place at night, so those sorts slept through the morning, apparently.

Not that it was an absolute.

“The fact that your opponent was at fault doesn’t solve the fundamental problem. In truth, a party like yours, Lyle-kun, is one that draws problems quite easily. You should caution them as their leader.”

Even if I wanted to refute that one, perhaps it was my responsibility to do so, so I nodded and left it at that.

Tanya confirmed the information on my guild card, and looked through the evaluations we had received up to now.

“… There’s been some empty time from your last records in Arumsaas. But evaluation-wise, you’ve obtained quite a line of high scores. If it’s like this, you’ll be able to participate in a Labyrinth clearing force soon.”

What Tanya-san had said was something not covered in the explanatory meeting, so I tilted my head.

When I tried asking, she sounded a little amazed.

“You didn’t know? The east branch is renowned for having large

amount of time completely wasted on movement, but of course there has to be some merits to it. Otherwise, adventurers wouldn't gather, right? One of the large pros to it is Labyrinth clearing."

For the Labyrinth managed by the free city of Beim, of course, it was forbidden to try and clear it.

It seems there are still idiots out there trying to challenge its innermost chamber, but such adventurers are promptly erased by a wholesome cleaning company known as the 【Sweepers】. Apparently.

Meaning those wishing to stick themselves to this city had exceedingly small chances to ever challenge an innermost chamber at all. They would never be able to obtain the treasure known as rare metal.

I heard the Third's voice from within the Jewel.

『So the merit is dungeon clearing? True, you can't go about doing that with a managed Labyrinth, so being able to get rare metal and other treasures is a huge bonus.』

The Fourth let out a doubtful voice.

『But none of that came out in the presentation. Perhaps there some reason to that.』

He had a point.

So I tried asking.

"… Is that something anyone can take part in?"

Tanya-san lightly shook her head to the side.

"No. We take it upon ourselves to dispatch a number of competent adventurer parties when they appear. In those cases, it's inevitable that parties with high evaluations are selected. When Labyrinths are found, those requests are set to be sent to the east branch with the highest priority. Other branches only get those sorts of requests once or twice a year?"

(Once or twice a year? It's that low? No, perhaps its best to think that high? I'm not too knowledgeable about that area.)

Hearing that, the Seventh sounded reluctant.

『Meaning unless your evaluation is high, you'll never get to challenge one. It's all up to the guild there.』

Tanya-san made a forced smile as she continued on.

"We welcome highly evaluated adventurers with open arms. Please continue to be competent adventurers during your stay in our branch."

So she's telling me to complete whatever jobs the guild sends us, and raise our evaluations.

Our past records should have some influence in the jobs selected for us.

I don't think we'll get anything we're unable to complete, even so I thought over the merit of being able to subjugate Labyrinths.

(Naturally, doing that can net you treasures and rare metal in the innermost chamber. Parties that the guild requests such subjugations from are those over a certain level of evaluation. It's a reliable system, but at the same time, it means I'll have competent rivals on the job.)

With the nature of the Skills in my hands, Labyrinths were a place where I could bring about results beyond my own abilities.

Perhaps transferring from the east branch isn't the best option after all.

(Even here, I can challenge Labyrinths of Beim. Then staying here for the time being sounds about right.)

If I closed my eyes to a few inconveniences, this really was a convenient guild to me.

Standing from my chair, I apologized to Tanya-san.

“I will give it my all to answer to your expectations. And I apologize for today’s ruckus. I’m sorry.”

After containing some laughter, Tanya-san removed her glasses and spoke.

“Even from a guild staff’s point of view, it was a series of events right out of a novel. It really was interesting. Lyle-kun, you’ve become quite a famous one on your first day here.”

As she smiled and said such things as, ‘my deepest condolences,’ and giving a sarcastic smile in return, I stood and left.

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That day.

After returning to the inn, I spent the time up to dinner alone.

I sent my consciousness into the Jewel to receive some training from the Sixth.

In his room of his memories, I faced him with my weapon aloft.

Thinking it was a room I’d seen before, I realized it was the room of the mansion where I had learned swordsmanship.

For the militaristic Walt House, a training room was quite an essential facility.

“It hasn’t changed a bit.”

I looked around and said that.

『It’s because there’s no reason to change the basics. Unless a large change comes to the battlefield, I’m sure it’ll stay like this for years to

come.』

Weapons, tactics, and magic…

As long as nothing groundbreaking came along to alter the scenery of the battlefield, the Sixth said training would always be the same.

A battle axe. Taking a stance with his halberd, he looked at me and laughed.

『Oddly enough, that Erhart brat was of the same type as me. Now what will you do!?』

He likely meant he was a power type, but the Sixth wasn't using anything to strengthen his muscles. Even if he was, I'm sure he could only use the First Generation's First stage 【Full Over】.

The halberd that looked more like a large axe had been fastened on a spear, specialized in the actions of cut and slice.

Its shaft was even longer than the giant sword, and unlike Erhart, the Sixth was plentiful in combat experience.

What's more, just how many times had he taken on human opponents?

Stanced, we moved as if to draw a circle around one another. While waiting for a chance to attack, or to parry his blow, the Sixth began his assault.

"Fast!"

Just like the First, the Sixth had been blessed with a large build.

And that man thrust out the halberd as he dove in.

Intimidating air and force well over Erhart. Should I try to turn its force aside… no, I should dodge here.

『Naïve. Way too naïve!』

I had managed to dodge the spear tip, but as he withdrew the weapon, the axe part dug into my left shoulder.

I thought it had merely grazed me, but it gouged much deeper than I had anticipated.

Blood spurted out, and when I tried to retreat back, he grabbed the far end of the polearm with one hand, and swung it in an arc.

"Brute force like that is…!"

『I said it, didn't I? That I'm a power type!』

When the halberd hit the ground, a cloud of sand rose, and a sensation like an earthquake had occurred assailed me.

While I was bewildered, he approached holding the shaft closer to the point this time.

Before he could lock blades with me, I sensed an opening and immediately thrust out my sabre.

He turned his head to the left to avoid it, and I tried to use my thrusting motion to turn the blade and cut at his neck diagonally.

But…

"… You can do that?"

『If I grab you like this, you can't get away, right? And something like this happens all day every day.』

With the blade of my sabre gripped in his left hand, he swung the halberd in his right.

I unhanded the sabre and tried to take some distance, but the Sixth rushed alongside me, tossed the sabre a distance away, and used his left hand to thrust at my chest and hoist me up by the collar.

Quite appropriate of his build… no, with power even greater than that,

he lifted me high up, and slammed me into the ground.

『I didn't go as far as to slam you head-first, but it hurts like hell, doesn't it?』

Released from his grasp, I sluggishly got to my feet.

My back had taken quite a blow, and I couldn't breathe. I couldn't match up to him in martial arts.

Our constitutions were too different. Even if my level of technique was over his, he had considerable skill himself, and enough knowledge to compensate.

And even more than all of that, he had no hesitation.

『Lyle, you still have a bit of hesitation against human foes.』

I opened my hand. The sabre manifested in it, so I grasped its hilt and took a stance.

The pain had already left me, and the wounds had reverted as if they were never there to begin with.

"It's not as if our relationship is just at the level of acquaintances. I don't think I'm all for pointing a weapon at you."

The Sixth smiled.

『You're thinking to deeply into it. I won't die here even if you kill me, so be at ease, and give it your all. And you see… even your all won't be able to beat me.』

His tone irritated me, and I ended up resorting to Skills.

With the First's 【Full Burst】 to raise my abilities several times over, I thrust out the blade.

But this time the Sixth sacrificed his left hand. He used it to block the incoming sabre, and naturally enough, the blade pierced through.

And even then, the Sixth smiled. He gripped the blade so as not to let it go, and spread the blood from his left hand on my face.

Quite purposely he had made the move, and even widened his wound for it.

“My eyes!”

My vision blocked, I used my Skills to search out my opponent’s movements.

But the Second’s, Fifth’s, Sixth’s…

In regards to following an enemy’s movements, it’s not like the Sixth would actually grant me the time.

Grasping for my moment of panic…

『The Second said it, didn’t he!? Skills only have meaning if you can master them! Resorting to them at the slightest provocation is what an idiot would do!』

The body of the axe portion was lowered on my head, and I fell to the ground.

His weapon over his shoulder, the Sixth began lecturing me.

『Listen here, you should really have taken some distance and tried attacking with magic. Of course, I would have dealt with it somehow, but you can use the Second’s Skill up to its final stage. If you fought with some distance between us, the possibility still…』

I unsteadily rose and looked at him.

『… What?』

“No I just thought that while you rarely stood out, you’re surprisingly strong, Sixth.”

Perhaps he was mindful of it, as he lowered the shaft of his halberd on my head.

『It's not that I don't stand out! The others' characters are too strong! That's why someone as normal and wholesome as me doesn't stand out.』

He was quite plainly strong.

(I don't think he's normal, but compared to the rest…)

He didn't play with his opponents like the Third.

Unlike the others that had some specific leanings in their battle styles, he was just plainly strong.

I'd never directly fought with the First or Second, but they had their habits.

The Second's weapon was a bow. It was rough in close quarters, but with some distance to an enemy, or a forest around, it could be quite a threat.

The First swung around his giant blade to the very limits of his physical strength, and that was to the level of working up a tempest.

As a result, the evaluation I gave to the Sixth was 'plainly strong'.

『Hah, that's it for today.』

He said that with slight abjection, and before I knew it, I found myself sabreless in the space in front of his room.

In the conference room with the round circle, the Fourth was waiting for me.

『Lyle, it's time for dinner. Novem-chan and the rest have come to wake you.』

Hearing that, I started off to return at once, but the Fourth stopped me. 'Wait a bit' he said, as he looked up at the ceiling.

“What is it?”

I looked up, and found myself looking at Novem’s face.

She was staring into something and touching it with her hand.

“… She’s waking me. And wait, that’s how you guys look at the outside world?”

The Fourth shook his head.

『There are times we can use your field of vision as well, and times we can only see like this from the Jewel. Of course, both of them use up your Mana all the same.』

I could bear it now, but it really was a pain when I had just gotten the Jewel. Whenever the ancestors acted up, I’d lose all my Mana and collapse.

“So what are we waiting for?”

The Fourth kept his eyes on the ceiling.

『… Novem-chan, you see, she’s looking at your face and smiling. Perhaps it’s best you stay like this a little longer.』

Looking up, I definitely could see her smile.

She was stroking my face.

“Then couldn’t I return and pretend to sleep a little…”

The Fourth…

『You’re right, but somehow, when she entered the room, she was looking at the Jewel. It’s just a hunch, but… I’m sure there’s still some things Novem-chan is hiding. I just wanted to put it out there.』

Hearing his opinion, I looked up at the scenes above the table.

Studying the girl's smile projected up onto it, I felt a little anxious.

Chapter 6: Harem Master

Novem and I stopped by the East branch by ourselves.

It was due to the necessity of accepting a request at the counters.

It's not like Beim's requests had to be completed as soon as they were accepted.

A time period was defined, and you need to complete a task within that time limit.

Due to the dispatch nature of the east branch, it wasn't rare for parties that weren't about to leave the city to stop by the guild in relatively casual clothing.

If a party's credibility was high, it was possible take on multiple requests for efficiency's sake.

But having only just arrived, we had no credibility in Beim. If I had to say, the fight I was dragged into gave us a negative starting point.

When we reached the guild, we did indeed manage to see many in casual clothes.

They wore robes, and had weapons hanging at their waists. But that's it.

They didn't give off the impression they were going off to do some work at all. Some exchanged light banter with the guild staff at the counters, while others confirmed their request conditions with serious faces.

And some even protested at the unsatisfactory contents of what they'd been issued.

The reason we brought our feet to the east branch so early in the morning was to take up a request. To build up our credibility, we would

have to complete a number of them.

And if we raised our evaluation in Beim, we would be able to challenge Labyrinths.

To get to challenging them as soon as we could, it was important to accumulate some daily effort.

And within all of that, the receptions desk I was deferred to was Tanya-san's.

(With so many counters, I just have to get this one again.)

Black bobbed hair. Slender as she was, her chest area was also… slender.

"… Are you not thinking something incredibly rude, Lyle-kun?"

"N-no. Nothing of the sort…"

"Your eyes seemed to be directed at my chest area. My apologies for being so perfectly level. Was that your way of asking for a difficult job?"

Novem apologetically lowered her head.

"I'm sorry. Lyle-sama didn't have any ill intent… I think."

Tanya-san was smiling a little, and she didn't seem to mind it.

"Well, if I worried over something like that, I'd never be able to work the adventurer's guild counter. And it's about your Party, Lyle-kun. This will be your first job in Beim, so it will be a bit of a test."

Atop the long counter with dividers separating it on both sides, a single document was handed over.

Accepting the request form, I confirmed its contents.

"… Monster subjugation, is it?"

Tanya-san nodded, and explained this time's request.

"The request is from a village of three days journey from Beim one way. It seems some Grey Wolves was spotted nearby. Please complete it within a period of twenty five days, and report your results to the counter. There's the possibility their numbers may have increased, but please expect at least ten."

A Grey Wolf was a wolf-like monster. The only real difference between the monster and the animal was whether or not you'd find magic stones in its body after killing one.

But on top of attacking in packs, their size exceeded that of most wolves, and they always launched assaults with humans as the highest priority.

"Is the village safe?"

I sought confirmation, and Tanya-san raised her shoulders.

"Beim's major fault is its lack of self-sufficiency in food supplies. We treasure nearby villages quite a bit. Because of that, even the smallest of them has sturdy walls."

The territory occupied by the city was truly small, and it was physically impossible for the city to be self-sufficient.

But with trade and magic stones and materials, as well as treasures and rare metal, the city could buy off food from its surroundings.

At the same time, it was Beim's main weakness.

"But is just buying from them enough to warrant…?"

When I said that, the Seventh let out his voice from the Jewel.

『Even if they have a low degree of self-sufficiency, they can't just go about doing nothing, Lyle. So as not to be taken advantage of, I'm sure they need to show off their capabilities to the surrounding countries.』

I withheld the urge to nod at his words, only to hear Tanya-san give much the same response. The latter half differed, though.

"Because if the city doesn't do anything, it's sure to be taken advantage of. Because we do pay quite a high price for our food resources. And the villages around Beim are full of people who used to be adventurers. They're places that support retired adventurers on their second lives. With that being the case, they won't fall to monsters so easily."

Hearing that, I thought the people would be able to manage it themselves. Tanya-san read those thoughts off of my expression.

"Then why put out a request to begin with? That's what you thought, right?"

"No, well…"

"If it gets rough, I'm sure they'll fight. But most of them have already retired. If they liked fighting so much, they'd still be adventurers at this point. Meaning they won't take the initiative to go out and fight monsters. Well, I've heard other reasons for it as well, but… there's quite a bit going on. Quite a bit."

I was curious about that 'quite a bit,' but it didn't sound like a fun topic, so I refrained from asking.

And I looked at the request form.

"I won't say it looks easy, but it's one we're able to take on."

Novem nodded.

"I'm sure it's possible for us to complete it. But what do you mean by test?"

Tanya-san grinned, and spoke.

"It's to see your competence."

Novem seemed to want to say something, but she cut herself off,

looked at me, and nodded.

“We’ll take it. It’s fine if we decide our own means of departure, right?”

Tanya-san nodded, and signaled for us to sign the form. After we did so, she accepted and filed it.

“We play no part in how you plan on going about it. Of course, if you end up sticking your hands in criminal work, you may end up being eliminated by the guild. This request is also for the sake of having you all learn how things work in Beim.”

Complete a simply request to learn how the system worked in Beim.

I accepted the form with all the details on it, as well as the paperwork to give to the requester before separating from the desk.

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The way back.

I conversed with Novem.

“Now then, it’s three days there, and three back… but I get the feeling they mean by horse.”

I said that while looking at the map, and Novem nodded.

Right. If we’re going by foot, then it may prove difficult if we don’t set off tomorrow.”

Based on what I could see on the form, a large part of the twenty five days would be taken up by transport.

Even if we arrived at the village in question, I’m sure it would take a

few days to complete the request.

“The trip both ways looks to be twenty days on foot? The time we can use for preparation is from two to three days… If you think about it normally, it’ll be quite a challenge.”

I gave a bitter smile.

I thought it would be near impossible if we were going by foot, but at the same time, it would be pointless any other way.

Because looking at the sum for the reward on the request form, if we rented a horse-drawn wagon, we’d have barely anything left to spare.

Novem chuckled.

“Did you refrain from asking on purpose?”

“Well, we have some financial leisure. No real reason to ask.”

With twenty five whole days, we could return in time quite easily. I’m sure if it was only getting the preparations ready, one day would be enough.

The Third let out his voice.

『Hm~, Lyle… how about you complete this one with some time to spare?』

I touched the Jewel, and the Third happily gave an explanation. He really seemed to enjoy feeling like he outwitted someone.

Quite a nice personality there.

『What, I’m sure this is quite probably a test of competence. Not strength, but the more important stuff. Perhaps I should call it the ability to get from point a to b? They want to see how long you’ll take to do it all.』

The Fifth sounded satisfied.

『They said it was a dispatch type guild, so something like that is an

important issue. Worse come to worst, no matter how strong one may be, if they aren't timely, it would be difficult for them to get work. I'm sure they're looking at other points as well, but… perhaps those former adventurers have a part in this.』

The Seventh spoke reluctantly.

『They sure are dirty folk. This is why I hate adventurers!』

The Fourth addressed him in a tired tone.

『What's all this so far in the game? We've done similar things… no things far worse than that if the times came to it, haven't we?』

The Seventh's hatred of adventurers was considerable, so all that backed his argument was his sentiment.

What's more, a guild properly existed in the Walt House's territory.

The Seventh had made use of them a number of times. That's why, while he wasn't satisfied with It, he could understand their predicament.

The Sixth brought it together.

『In that case, our attitude out there may also be on their testing agenda. If it's just something on the level of Gray Wolves, then whatever retired adventurers they have there should be able to manage with it.』

The Third was having fun.

『There's no need to teach them what our fastest is. Just get there with a bit of leisure, and deal with it the same. Because if they know what you can do, they're sure to make full (ab)use of it. It's good enough for them to think of you all as adventurers that can deal with things, more or less.』

I gripped the Jewel, and turned my eyes to Novem walking beside me. But she was looking at the Jewel… no, at my hand.

"Lyle-sama, you sure seem to make that gesture a lot. Has it become a

habit?”

She wasn’t really pressing or anything. She was just observing my actions.

Perhaps it had been on her mind for a while.

“R-really? No, it’s been quite reliable for me, so I always end up holding it like this. Maybe it’s becoming a bit of a habit? Well, it’s nothing strange, so isn’t it fine?”

Novem smiled, and…

“I guess you’re right. You sometimes tap it and let it roll, but is there something different between the two?”

While thinking she was being especially persistent today, I vaguely let it slide.

“I never paid that much mind to it… more importantly, the time is quite a questionable one. It’s too early for lunch, yet late for breakfast. Do you want to find some place to rest?”

Around us, various cafes were lined up.

Among the shops used by adventurers and residents, a few of them were closed with signs hung on their doors stating they weren’t yet open for business.

A few adventurers were already eating.

(Do we have a different sense of time? No, perhaps they’ve just come out from the Labyrinth, and their internal clocks are off?)

According to Clara, we had Monica to thank for that one.

She precisely notified us of the time, so within the darkness of the Labyrinth, we always knew how many days had passed, and our senses of time never went amiss.

Novem was…

“Before that, we really have to inform them of the request we took up. I’m sure they’re waiting.”

I nodded, and started walking off in the direction of the inn.

“Hey, Novem?”

“Yes?”

What I wanted to ask Novem about, was Miranda and the rest of the party.

After Novem had divulged her motives in the Faunbeux mansion, the party’s atmosphere had become somewhat strained.

No, rather than strained, it felt more business-like than before.

I didn’t get the feeling Miranda was working something behind the scenes yet. There’s the possibility I simply hadn’t noticed, but I carefully and frequently checked with my Skills, and came up short.

Right, there was nothing.

In the current party, there were barely any conversations.

Novem was often with Eva.

Miranda with Shannon.

Clara was generally fine alone, and she occasionally went around with Novem or Miranda.

Aria often got herself into petty quarrels with Monica, but she was usually somewhere around Miranda.

Monica was… well, she didn’t really show interest to anyone besides me. She did look after everyone else as well, but there was quite a clear difference in enthusiasm.

“Do you think it’ll all work out?”

I didn’t say in what.

Novem smiled, and nodded.

“It’s alright. I’m sure we’ll all be able to manage in Beim. With your level of abilities, Lyle-sama, you’re surely going to become a first-rate adventurer.”

I scratched my head.

“… I see.”

Meaning Novem plans to maintain the status quo with Miranda. If neither of them plan on intervening with the other, then it’s better than having them at each other’s throats.

But…

(Is that really fine?)

Isn’t it my job to do something about their relationship? That’s what I thought.

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Night.

I was within the Jewel.

In the Fifth’s room of memory, I was lying face first flat on the ground. My breathing was a mess, I was dripping with sweat and blood… Even after that subsided, I couldn’t get myself up.

The Fifth held a onehanded sword in his right hand, but its blade had several partitions in it.

A galient sword.

(TL: See footnote)

Its user, the Fifth, was looking down on my without breaking a sweat.

『Your movements are worse than before. You easily fall for feints. On top of that, you're not outputting enough power. Your concentration is all over the place.』

Summing up my points to reflect on, he let the sword in his right hand disappear. The sabre pierced in the ground near me vanished as well.

『… Are the morning's events still weighing on your mind?』

Perhaps paying mind to my feelings, the Fifth bent his back and addressed me.

"It's not like I have any interest in a Harem, but we're all comrades in the same party. I want to help everyone get along…"

When I raised the upper half of my body, the Fifth put his hand to his brow, and began to shake his head.

The Fifth definitely had a Harem as well, so perhaps he had some advice to offer.

"Do you have any suggestions on how to resolve it? Is it best to have them talk it out?"

The Fifth…

『You're seriously asking me? I'm sure you've got the wrong person, but… well, I guess I'm the best you've got.』

From what I've heard, the Sixth also kept mistresses. But the Seventh didn't speak too highly of that one.

I mean, after seeing that harem, the Seventh resolved to only ever have one wife.

“Did the Sixth fail?”

When I asked, he fluttered his left hand to refute it.

『Fool. Do you even think there’s a single way to succeed? Think about it the other way. If Novem went and got another guy, would you forgive it? Because you both like her all the same, why not just live under the same roof? What would you do if that happened to you?』

I shook my head with all my might, and he nodded.

『If there were five or six men around Novem, do you still think you could love Novem alone?』

I thought over it a while, and denied it full force.

My feelings wouldn’t catch up.

“As I thought, harems are no good. Personally, I’m fine with just Novem, but… I understand I’m in a situation that won’t permit it. Still, harems are a little…”

『Out of the question, right? At best, a lover, perhaps? If it was just a political marriage, then it’s perfectly normal for both sides to get a lover once they’ve had a kid or two. I’m not in a position where I can speak up on those matters, but.. the Walt House has definitely had its estrangements. It’s just that in your case, those girls’ objectives are you yourself, and that’s what makes it so difficult. I mean, if they give up, I doubt they’d ever follow you anyways.』

From how the First went off to join the pioneering corps, being able to go anywhere for the person you love must be quite a commendable and charming deed.

But if you put Eva aside as a special case, the others were aiming for me.

The Fifth was also mindful of that.

“Then what is it I should do?”

He put it quite bluntly.

『Don’t do anything. Listen here, as long as it doesn’t get bloody, you definitely shouldn’t put your mouth into the relations of those two women.』

Surprisingly enough, his answer was for me not to do anything.

(TL: A galient sword is a fictitious weapon with some real life inspirations, often referred to as a whip sword or snake sword. There are similar real world equivalents, but nothing quite the same. You know, it’s that thing that Iris Heart(Neptunia) and Ivy(Soul Calibur) use, and I guess you can call Zabimaru(Bleach) one to an extent. You can get one in Bloodborne(Threaded Cane) too. Its name is taken from the 1984 anime Panzer World Galient, where the sword’s namesake is such a weapon. Most of the time, the item in question is bolstered with magic or science to make its design feasible. On a side note, Panzer World Galient is the first ever anime to throw giant f*ing mechs into a european medieval setting.)

Chapter 7: May

It seems I had yet to fully grasp the city known as Beim.

All preparations I thought may have taken days to complete, were completed in one.

Cramming all our baggage into Porter, we once again realized the fearsomeness of the city known as the land of adventurers.

Miranda checked over all our supplies.

“Two weeks’ worth of food, and about the same for water? I get that we got a time period of basically a month, but isn’t that a bit much?”

It’s not as if we spent that much on supplies.

We had food rations from before we entered Beim, and that just hadn’t been enough.

I also confirmed the supplies, and looked at the equipment we had purchased.

“We don’t know how many Gray Wolves there are, and over all else, we’ve decided not to go all out.”

Perhaps finding it a bit interesting, Miranda grinned at me.

“Hmm? May I ask the reason?”

I smiled.

“Because there’s no need to teach them our all out.”

That was it.

“It’s an exam, isn’t it?”

Miranda seemed to have already noticed it, but she was enjoying the conversation. I didn't hate talking with her either.

"It's precisely because it's an exam. Giving the guild an exact grasp of our highest movement speed and battle prowess will become a pain further down the line. I've no intention to be used up all the time."

Satisfied with that answer, she leaned her upper body over a crate loaded in Porter, and smiled at me.

"What?"

When I asked…

"Nothing really. I just thought, 'ah, so Lyle can be a little devious too.' Oh, I like you better that was, so I don't mean it in a bad way, mind you."

Miranda hated actions that wouldn't bring benefit to her. No, rather than hate, she always thought of them as having some ulterior motive.

How did the elder sister so good at looking after others from Arumsaas come down to this? Or so I thought as I sent a glance at Shannon, who was hoisting things onto Porter near me.

(It's certain the Shannon did something unnecessary, but I wonder what's best for the individual herself…)

"Something about Shannon?"

I had only looked at her for a split second, but Miranda reacted immediately.

I heard the Third's voice from within the Jewel.

『How scary. Love heavy enough to not let a single turn of the eye go unnoticed!』

He's definitely having fun with this.

“Just that she’s sure working hard. Well, she was quite terrible up to now, thought.”

Shaking as she took the bags over, and even loading them herself, perhaps she had been holding her breath, as Shannon started inhaling heavily.

Her brow was tinged with sweat.

“Is that the last of it?”

She returned my question with a glare.

“Hauling the heavy loads should be the man’s job!”

I put my hand on my forehead, and purposefully showed off a fed-up gesture.

“That one’s quite light, actually.”

Shaking, Shannon looked as if she were thinking of something to say back. But in the end, she gave up.

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The morning of the next day, Novem and I went off to submit the paperwork to inform the guild of our departure.

The period we reported was for around two weeks, but as the receptionist was not Tanya-san, they didn’t probe too deeply into it.

After submitting it, I put Porter away in the Seventh’s 【Box】, and a few hours after we had left the city, we took it out and boarded it.

Having been reborn in Centralle, Porter’s height now surpassed two meters, and its width was quite considerable as well.

Even after its length surpassed six meters, Porter's head was still fastened onto on the front right side of the top.

It had changed from a hanging lantern to one embedded in the front armor. The armoring on both sides could be deployed, and this time, joints were attached, to let them turn at will.

And above all else, the wheels were centerpiece this time around.

Surrounded in rubber material, filled with air, they had some width to them, yet firmly supported Porter's bulk.

"This is my power! Have you bore witness to it, you goddamn chicken!?"

Standing atop Porter with her arms spread out wide, Monica let out a triumphant laugh.

Her skirt was swaying in the wind, but she looked down on me in a state where their contents were always almost, yet never visible.

(Just what is she trying to accomplish?)

Even before that, I've become curious as to what the guy who made this one was thinking.

She absolutely won't remove her maid clothes. She clearly had some functions built in unnecessary for whatever maid work she was to do.

And with her battle prowess, is she like this because she was broken? Or was this the basis before she was broken at all…

My head hurt the more I thought about it.

"No, I just saw it none too long ago. And wait, we boarded it before getting to Beim too, didn't we?"

Based on its size, if we didn't make some revisions to Porter's width, it would be difficult to maneuver in a Labyrinth.

But at present, our party didn't have the need to move through a Labyrinth.

Due to my largely expanded reservoir of Mana, I could use the Seventh's Box, and expand it far enough to stow away its entire mass.

"Porter, next I'll be adding arms onto you."

Preciously patting Porter's head, Monica put up some plans to expand it even more.

But hearing that, Clara…

"Increasing its weight any more will make it hard. No wait, I don't think I'll even be able to drive it anymore, so please contain yourself."

She sounded apologetic, but Clara really was proficient in using Golem magic to maneuver Porter.

I…

"Isn't Porter fine like this? If you want to do something else, work it separately. Ah, we'll have to do some work on Mini Porter too."

Mini-Porter.

That was what we sold off in Arumsaas, a smaller scale golem replica of our own.

It was made to prioritize baggage transportation and movement in a Labyrinth, and was thus downscaled quite a bit.

Fed up, Aria came over to me.

"Can you put that talk off to later, and say what we're to do? Do we just all get on like this? Or proceed around it, keeping wary of the surroundings?

I gave orders for everyone to hop aboard.

“No, get in. We’ll spend around five days in motion, and spend three to four days completing the request there. Another five days back, and there the request is done.”

Perhaps unsatisfied with that, Aria was in ill spirits.

“If the village has some adventurers of their own, why can’t they take down something of Gray Wolf level? Going out of their way to pay money for it and everything.”

Aria’s opinion was a sound one, but I’m sure both the village and the guild had something to benefit from it.

Otherwise, they’d never submit such a request to begin with.

“Well, we can think over it on the way there. Now hop aboard already.”

Urging Aria on, and getting everyone inside, I looked around.

The Fifth curtly…

『Around Beim is one thing, but if you get a bit away, there’ll be plenty of monsters.』

I compared the map that popped up in my head to the simple one in my hands to confirm our destination.

Theoretically, it would be three days on horse.

But at the end of the day, that was just a theory. If there were mountains, they’d have to be circumvented, and if we encountered a forest, Porter wouldn’t be able to proceed.

If the time comes to rest, I’m sure we’ll find a suitable place.

Going over a route to our destination, I let out a sigh.

(The request itself is simple enough, so why must it be such an

inconvenience?)

I climbed up the ceiling portion, took over control, and used a Skill.

The Fourth's 【Speed】 Skill was one to elevate movement speed.

Urging Porter on, I sat cross-legged on the roof, and set it on the right path.

(As I am at the moment, I think that if I pushed myself, we could get there in a single day without rest.)

Unlike horses, Porter itself didn't require breaks.

According to Monica, it required maintenance, but there was no doubt it was built sturdy.

Meaning as long as my Mana didn't run dry, and it was still in a state where it could be driven, it could always go on.

(Well, there's no need to push it either.)

Thinking that, I confirmed the surroundings, and urged Porter on.

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It was the events of the second day.

Clara was the one driving, and I spent my time just watching over that.

We had finished our lunch, and were exchanging some trifling banter amongst ourselves.

A part of the roof was made to open, and going out from there, I issued orders to Clara in a loud voice.

“Clara, think you can increase the speed?”

“Eh? Is something wrong?”

On the map in my head, there were a number of red indicators around. They were numerous, but were only Grey Wolves.

Nothing we couldn’t beat, and more so, they were a nuisance, so it would be best off if they just came closer to get struck down.

They displayed blatant movements to pursue us, and we were more than prepared for that, but…

(A blue signal? But it’s chasing us… at such a speed…)

From behind the red dots following us at a tremendous rate. It was chasing at a speed even greater than ours.

And the red points began vanishing one after the other.

The Fifth gave me some orders from the Jewel.

『I’m curious as to why it’s a blue signal. But it may catch up to you soon. Be ready to intercept.』

When I still had no idea what we were facing, I didn’t want to lie in wait, but I had Porter stop, and issued orders to everyone.

“… Clara, stop Porter, and stay on standby. Deploy the shielding. Something’s coming from behind. Everyone, come out with your weapons in hand. Something’s trying to chase us.”

From within Porter, I heard Aria’s voice.

“What do you mean by something?”

“Does it matter? Hurry!”

Clara stopped Porter, turned it a hundred and eighty degrees, and spread out its shielding.

I jumped off the roof, and stood in front with my sabres drawn.

Looking at the map, I saw the Grey Wolf pack had noticed it was being hunted down, and had scattered.

But even quite separated from the blue dot, the red dots kept vanishing in quick succession.

The Fifth…

『What? What is happening?』

The Third unpleasantly…

『A monster like Celes? The Lyle's got to be the one that drew it out.』

It's definitely not my fault… or so I'd like to believe.

But far off, a strong light flashed out, and some light tremors echoed through the earth.

"Magic? Enemy responses have… completely vanished?"

I increased my vigilance. Whatever it was still gave off a blue signal, and it was busy observing its surroundings. Once all the reds had gone out, it began to approach us.

I took a stance, and everyone who came out besides Shannon held up their weapons.

【Dimension】.

One of the Fifth's Skills, and one that had the map gain a third dimension to it. When I used it, I ended up looking up.

"From the sky?"

Lifting my face a little, the small dot began to grow in size.

Without any wings growing from its back, the life form had a horn atop its head.

Its figure gradually grew clearer, letting me make out its white scales, and golden mane.

A horse. A unicorn.

That's what I thought when I saw the horn, but it was nothing of the sort.

Clara muttered, and Eva cried out.

"It's the first time I'm seeing one. I think it's best everyone lower their weapons now."

"A quilin? Really!? Amazing, amazing, isn't it!?"

A divine beast that appeared as a horse galloping across the sky. The base of its feet let off a glittering light. Every time the beast's legs came down on the air, the light was smashed as if an invisible road really did exist across the sky.

I came quite near us, so we put away our weapons, and waited for it to pass.

And I was looking up at that quilin, Novem came and approached me.

"Lyle-sama, it's headed straight for us."

Come to think of it, the quilin was dropping its speed, and approaching the ground. No, perhaps from its point of view, it was just descending?

Anyways, I watched the beast slow down and approach us.

(The Fifth also had some fate with a quilin, right? And is this really safe?)

The fact its pointer was blue meant it didn't have the will to oppose me.

But approaching with its huge bulk, the divine beast looked down over me.

The Sixth spoke.

『For there to be a quilin as splendid as this… worlds away from the one you kept at home, right, Fifth?… Fifth?』

Turning the Sixth a cold shoulder, the Fifth remained silent.

Its size was around two to three times that of a horse.

It crept closer to my face, retracted the horn protruding from its head, and stared at me with its blue eyes. I stared at my own reflection in those clear pupils, and gulped down my breath.

And it looked at Novem standing to my side.

Twisting its head a little, it headed off to her side.

There, I noticed a scar on the left side of the base of its neck. It had undergone a full recovery, and that was what remained of an old injury.

As I looked at that, the Fifth in the Jewel…

『There's no doubt about it. You're… why at a place like this…』

When the Fifth let out his voice, the quilin turned its head to me.

It was staring at me with its eyes open wide.

"Eh? That can't… it's been more than eighty years already."

Hearing me speak, the quilin tilted its head some more.

The Fifth spoke out.

『May… you… you remembered our promise?』

The quilin's eyes darted to the Jewel hanging at my neck. And it began glaring at me.

The horn extended from its head once more, and in hostility, its signal changed to yellow and red. It immediately leapt back, leaving a faint light where it stood.

"What did you do!?"

Aria shouted at me, but I denied it.

"As if I know! I didn't do anything!"

Novem jumped out in front of me, held up her staff, and produced a barrier of magic. The cry of a quilin differed from that of a horse. It let out a voice the timbre and pressure of a dragon's roar, and a scream came in response from the Jewel.

『It's fine! May, Lyle isn't an enemy!』

Hearing that, it continued kicking the ground and staring at me. Its response started flickering between yellow and red. I broke into a cold sweat.

After glaring at Novem a while, the quilin vexingly kicked off the ground, and ran off through the sky.

Everyone let out deep sighs, and a tired feeling swiftly descended over me.

And all their eyes gathered here.

Novem was…

"Lyle-sama, just what is it that you did? As long as you don't direct an attack at it, a quilin will never show such a response."

Eva…

“Hey, did you really not do anything? I don’t want to be the mark of a quilin, you know.”

Clara.

“From what I saw, it hasn’t been long since that one reached adulthood, or perhaps it’s still a child. If it had matured, that first attack would have blown all of us sky-high.”

And in truth, it did blow up a mass of Grey Wolves.

I clenched the Jewel.

(Did it hold back because of this? I’m sure it could hear the voices.)

As I thought in wonder, Aria looked at me.

“So anything come to mind?”

Everyone was sending some dubious looks, so I refuted.

“I put my weapon away, and did you see me do anything that looked like an attack? Look here, I’m not that much of an idiot, and I’m not the sort of battle maniac who’d want to fight it in the first place! I’m the one who should be wondering why it attacked.”

I did have something come to mind, but explaining would take time.

It may be around the right time to tell them the truth, but saying it with this timing is a bit…

Shannon looked at me.

“So quilins hate you. Serves you right. By the way, why’s that one react whenever your Jewel let off a light? What’s more, only when a specific one of them glowed?”

Miranda turned to Shannon, and back to me.

The Fourth let his voice from the Jewel.

『Ah, as I thought, that girl could see it.』

The Sixth too.

『I think it's about time to say it, but this situation is…』

Shannon said something like, 'it brightened again,' and as I reacted to that statement, Miranda confirmed it was no lie.

"Won't you speak up, Lyle?"

Surrounded by all, I slowly stepped back, only to run into Monica who circled behind.

"Did you know, chicken dickwad… maids just happen to love secrets. Now speak, and it'll get much easier for you."

Grasping both of my shoulders, and making sure I couldn't run away, Monica was smiling.

"Y-you guys… think that I'm hiding something? Isn't it fine to trust me a little more?"

I gave a vague smile, and searched for my escape route, but surrounded like this, there was nowhere I could go.

There, Novem spoke.

"Well, we have time to spare, so how about we have a nice long chat in Porter, Lyle-sama?"

Today as well, Novem's smile was quite a beautiful one. The reason I found it a little scary must be due to my guilty consciousness. That's definitely it.

(Dammit, I'm sure it's supposed to be a load off my mind if I speak, but somehow I get the feeling it's a bad idea to do it now.)

And the fact I constantly had a parental chaperone was a bit of an embarrassing one.

The reason I didn't want to was to protect the small bit of pride I had left. If course, the more important reason was…

『Of all times, now is a bad one. With Celes' case and all, they may be quite wary of Jewels. It'd be troublesome if they come under the impression we're possessing you or anything. Let's see… how about you overcome the situation by explaining the effects of your new Skill? That one has enough impact to wash most things away.』

That's what the Third said, but I had even more hesitation to explain my own 【Connection】 Skill.

(… But as I thought, it's no good if I don't tell them eventually. This isn't the right timing, so I'll try changing the topic to Ckills… but…)

I kept thinking over how to overcome this situation.

Chapter 8: Connection

As a general rule, Skills grew more powerful the more stages they attained.

For those that have Skills that strengthen their body, it's generally the case that they get an even stronger version for its expansions.

But there exist exceptions in everything.

My first stage Skill 【Experience】 was a shady-as-all-hell one that stated that it gave more experience than one would usually obtain.

And with that, I was able to constitute for my constitution that required a large amount of experience, and rarely experienced Growth in the first place.

But then there's the second stage. 【Connection】.

It was a Skill related to bonds.

Nothing to do with obtaining more experience; something completely different.

And I would have preferred just gaining more experience. Even if my constantly active 【Experience】 sucked up quite a bit of Mana already.

Even if the amount consumed increased a little, my Mana was plentiful enough to support it at this point in time.

The problem is that something completely irrelevant had come out.

After encountering the quilin, Shannon had to go and make me sound dubious, so I was going to explain it and change the subject.

It really was bad timing to explain that I had the wills of five different ancestors recorded in the Jewel.

(I really should have just explained that one before it came down to this.)

I mean, the main reason was just that explaining it would be a pain.

T-the truth is, I'm… perpetually chaperoned!

I did have the sentiment so as not to say it, and a bit of pride so as not to have others think of me as such.

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Night.

A fire alit near porter, I was offered a warm drink in a metallic cup.

Everyone was waiting for me to start talking.

Shannon had her eyes on the Jewel, so the ancestors remained silent.

(… Really bad timing on my part.)

Shannon and Eva were speaking about the Jewel.

And they already knew that Celes had one quite similar. Because of that, if voices rose against the artifact, things really would get troublesome.

Doubtful stares around, albeit a small portion looked on with intrigue.

"… The truth is, there's something I've been concealing."

A white steam rose from the cup, and occasionally a cold wind would come to sway it. I stared at it as I quietly continued.

"It's about my Skills."

Shannon tilted her head.

“Hey, why is it Skills? Just talk about the blue Jewel on your neck already…”

“Because they’re related!”

Shannon was taken aback, the contents of her cup leaping a little, some of it ending up on the ground.

I apologized, and explained my skills.

“My Skill… 【Experience】 is one to acquire a greater amount of, well, experience. It’s perpetually active.”

Hearing that, Eva…

“Uwah, that’s really convenient. Support Class, was it? Can’t you live on that one alone?”

I nodded, and started on the second Skill.

“It’s just the second stage 【Connection】 is… one to build links.”

Clara had been raising her cup to her mouth, but she stopped and looked at me.

“I can’t think it a greater application of the first.”

I gulped down a sip, and dampened the inside of my mouth before continuing.

“It’s a Skill to create special lines with me at the center. You can convey mutual understanding… right, it’s because that activated that the quilin got angry, it seems.”

The moment I said that, everyone’s eyes went sharp.

Novem still sent some doubtful eyes.

(Okay! Break through like this!)

I began to realize that this story had much more persuasive power than the unprovable existences of the ancestors.

To speak the whole truth, I'd have to go from the Jewel to an explanation of the Ancestors' Skills.

And I'd have to tell the Fifth's story as well.

And I'm fine with saying all of that, but it would be a pain if misunderstandings cropped up. Like of whether I was being manipulated and whatnot.

If that mindset came about, it would be quite hard to solve the misunderstanding.

Because the truth as it was, was that Celes' change had a clear relation to the Jewel in her hands. And Novem had already explained that to everyone.

I don't want to be thought of as the same, and having them seal away the Jewel truly will be troublesome.

Aria sighed.

"Meaning it got angry because you used a Skill? … so it's your responsibility after all."

The look she sent me was quite a cold one, but within my heart…

(Okay! Now talks are proceeding in the direction of Skills!)

If I had just opened up earlier, I wouldn't have to go through this… and it isn't just once or twice I've had such regrets.

Miranda…

"If that's true, then you're quite something, Lyle. That mutual understanding thing is interesting in itself. It's as if you awakened to

another Skill altogether."

The first was experience amplification.

The second mutual understanding with comrades.

They really were totally different Skills. But if you ask if that's what prevented me from saying it, I'd have to say that isn't the case.

(Ah~ should I say it? But if I don't… I don't really want to.)

The moment the Skill had manifested, its name and uses had come into my head quite clearly, as if I was simply remembering something I'd been taught none too long ago.

It was why everyone could understand how to use their own Skills. Naturally, I knew exactly how to use Connection.

I understood it, but I didn't want to say it up to now.

(If I say it, another strange misunderstanding will pop up, won't it…)

I really didn't want to talk about it, and if possible, I didn't want to use it either. Its performance was spectacular, but the method to make the lines was no good at all.

I myself thought it questionable.

Miranda urged me on.

"And so, why is it you haven't used that Skill on us? Do you perhaps not want to be peeped on?"

I averted my eyes from her grin.

"… Once the lines are made, I'm the one managing them, so peeping is impossible. Perhaps it's best to think of it as the ability to hear each other's' voices regardless of the distance or obstacles in between? Ah, maybe distance is relevant, though."

Clara raised her glasses with the tip of her finger, returning them to their original positioning, before speaking a little excitedly.

“That’s amazing. I’m sure there was a similar basic Skill in the Support Class, but just having it was enough to get scouted immediately. Because it’s a Skill to let a group move more efficiently.”

Everyone present got a little excited, but there, Novem…

“… Lyle-sama, why have you never used it up to now? Is there some sort of problem?”

Thinking the time had finally come, I gulped down what remained in my cup. It had become lukewarm, but on the contrary, quite easy to down.

Monica approached, and poured some more.

“… It’s a kiss.”

Eva looked at me strangely.

“What?”

“To establish the lines, what’s needed is a kiss! What’s more you have to do it every time you want to use it! Would any of you really believe it if I said something like that!”

Everyone made complicated expressions, as they looked at me. Aria opened her mouth.

“J-just a little k-kiss and it’s over, right? What, it’s not l-like we’re kids or anything.”

Her face was deep red, and even if she said something like that, she held no persuasive power. Among us, isn’t Aria the most innocent to things like that?

“Not a light one. To make a line, you need the deeper variant! Not the one a parent gives their child!”

Her face still flushed, Aria began muttering what sounded like, ‘d-deep…’ as she hung her head.

Making a complex expression, Miranda let out a sigh.

“Hah… so Lyle, what you’re saying is as follows? You wanted to make a line with that quilin, and were going to try and… kiss it?”

Reluctant as I was, all I could do was nod.

“… Yes. That’s exactly right.”

Clara said, ‘well of course it’d get angry,’ while Eva: ‘I’m sure there are people who love animals enough to do that.’ She was making a cramped smile.

Shannon drew back.

“So you angered it by trying to kiss it? Are you an idiot?”

I knew it was coming, but it dealt more damage than anticipated when it actually reached my ears.

Miranda was sending a fed-up glance.

Novem put her hand to her mouth, thinking deeply over something.

Monica…

“Good grief… if you’d just said it, then I’d have given you as many kisses as you wanted, shallow or deep as they need be! Now, chicken dickwad… let’s adult kiss, and make a line with all due haste.”

I held back Monica’s head with my left hand, as she approached with both arms spread, and gave it to her straight.

“No, you already have some sort of Mana line formed, so a kiss is unnecessary. Great, ain’t it? I don’t have to kiss you to form a line with you.”

Hearing that, Monica collapsed on the spot.

“You’ll lock tongues with an animal, yet won’t kiss the world’s ideal maid Monica… even so, I shall serve you by your side to the end. Oh pitiful Monica. She shall never lose to something like a quilin!”

(This girl is a pain…)

The air had become quite strained, but I felt relief that I had somehow overcome the situation.

Though I got the feeling I lost more than what I gained.

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Midnight.

I confirmed that everyone besides the watch was asleep, and carried my consciousness into the Jewel.

In the room with the round table, the Fifth was waiting.

He was sitting in his chair, but it seems he couldn’t calm down.

His elbows were atop the table, one hand under his jaw, and the other incessantly tapping the conference table.

(TL: I just realized this, but English really doesn’t have a synonym for table, does it…)

『You’re sure late.』

“I was misunderstood quite a bit, but I somehow managed to explain it. Because of that, I’m being taken for a pervert.”

When I said that, the Fifth tilted his head.

『How does something like kissing an animal make one a pervert? To an animal, that's just something of a greeting, dammit. Oh, right. Come to my room at once.』

Saying that, the Fifth brought me with him through his room of memories.

The Fifth's room was a space like a stable that continued on a long way.

But it wasn't just livestock contained within.

Various animals of various sizes carried out their lives.

"Um, this is?"

『The rearing pen I prepared. At the start, it was just things like cats and dogs. Next came the birds, and I think it was there that the brakes broke. When it came to these guys, they just kept on increasing.』

No, aren't you the one increasing them?

When I thought that, the door in the back of the relatively vast stable went and opened by itself.

Inside, white with golden mane, and a small horn with a rounded off tip growing from its head, lay a quilin.

"So its neck was injured?"

A bandage was wrapped around it, and perhaps it was wary, as it rolled itself into a ball in the depths of the room. The bandage around its neck had turned red, and it doesn't look like it had laid a hand on its meal.

『I gave her the name May. I mean, even as a quilin, she didn't develop any affection, try as I may.』

(TL: The original pun here is that Mei means niece, and he's joking that a niece never warms to her strange uncle.)

The Fifth patted a cowering May, but as we were within his memories, she didn't show a reaction.

Footsteps were audible from the entrance to the stable. Two had entered it, and among them was a middle aged Fifth fully loaded with bags and parcels.

The Fifth of memories looked at May, and…

『You, if you don't eat, you'll never get healthy.』

Then is the one with him a veterinarian? The man's shaking in his boots.

『Dear viscount, if you detain a quilin, it will call for its comrades, and shower you with retribution, or so I've heard. You should return her to the wild as soon as possible. And just what will the surrounding lords say when…』

Turning to the vet, Fredricks scoffed.

『And what of it? She was injured, so I took her back and treated her. I haven't the slightest ill-intent. And with her injured too badly to even walk straight, you'll toss her out to the wayside?』

For him to show so much love to an animal…

(No, you should really give a little more of that love to your family, you know.)

Is what I ended up thinking, but I kept my mouth shut.

From a bag, he took out an expensive-looking medicine, and handed it over to the veterinarian.

『If it's insufficient, I'll assemble as much as you'll need. All you have to do is treat this child.』

He took the medicine, and started the treatment.

The quilin warily took up a posture to attack with its horn, widening its wound, and dyeing the bandages a deeper red. Pale blue lines sparked about, but the Fifth held her down.

『Hurry!』

『V-viscount, that's dangerous!』

The veterinarian hastily began administering the medicine, but when he was done, it was the Fifth that was in tatters.

He immediately carried him out and shouted.

『Someone come!! The Viscount is…!!』

And within that panicked voice, the Fifth laughed.

『Ah, right, something like that did happen. I'd totally forgotten it.』

I felt some pity for the fet. With the treatment over, May lay down, and closed her eyes.

Seeing that, the Fifth…

『Adorable, ain't she?』

"No, when you think of how big she's gotten in seventy to eighty years, it's more of a shock than anything else to me."

The one I met was a splendid adult quilin.

Hearing the Fifth's voice, I remember how she had directed her hostility for some reason.

"Um, so… why did she act so hostile to me? There wasn't anything at the start."

When I said that, the Fifth put his hand to his chin in thought.

『… No, I cannot understand it. In the first place, it's strange she even came up to you. Quilins race across the sky bringing ruin to evil. That's why they're known as divine beasts. They never try to approach humans.』

Quilins were said to be good luck, and were renowned for bringing prosperity to the house of whoever caught one.

But in truth, there were countless examples of where many had failed while trying to catch one.

There were some success stories out there, but they were the small minority.

Not just within a country, quilins spanned continents killing monsters on the way, hating all contact with humans. No, they always maintained a set distance.

But as long as humans didn't launch attacks on them, they wouldn't do anything in return.

"But she definitely reacted to your voice, right Fifth? You didn't do anything to buy any resentment, did you?"

『… Hey. I may have failed completely in marriage and child rearing, but I've not a single failure to report in relations to animals!』

I get the feeling that's no good in itself.

"Then why was May so angry?"

『And here we are in my memories trying to find that one out. Now let's go to the next one.』

I followed him as he walked off, the scenery around us changing.

We were in the courtyard of the mansion.

Chapter 9: A Journey of Memory

Looking through the Fifth's room to find a countermeasure for the quilin, I stumbled upon a certain memory.

It was inside the stable the Fifth kept as a hobby. In its inner room, the quilin was eating a meal.

As the Fifth took care of the other animals, the servant managing the place turned to stop someone at the entrance.

『Don't go any further. Fredricks-sama told me not to let anyone in!』

『Move! I have something to say to pops!』

The one who burst in quite violently was a young Sixth Generation.

His early twenties, perhaps? He was more youthful than the form I usually saw him in, and quite gruff at that.

『Pops, what's the meaning of this!?』

After he ran the room's expanse to the quilin's room in the back, Fredricks let out a sigh.

『What are you here for? I'm sure I said not to enter.』

Fredricks indifferently turned, and the Sixth, Fiennes, grabbed his collar.

There was quite a difference in height, and the young and strong-looking Fiennes made it look like Fredricks' small build was sure to lose.

『Why did you keep quiet about that quilin!? Meaning to show it off? Or use it as the Walt House's horse? The rumors are already spreading, and inquiries from other territories are already…』

At a glance, it looked like the Sixth was overwhelmingly dominating the Fifth.

And that the Sixth was the one at fault here.

『… Unhand me. Who the do you think you're taking that attitude with?』

And saying that, Fredricks hurled Fiennes off, sending him sprawling into a piled up lump of straw.

Hitting his hands together, and getting all the dust off, he walked over to the quilin.

Timid as it was, the beast approached him, and began eating from his hand.

"… Wasn't that a little mean?"

『Which one are you talking about?』

When he said that, I went over the Fifth and Sixth in my mind. When my eyes showed off my conclusion, the Fifth smiled.

『Yep, looks like we're both terrible people. Right, let's go with that.』

With those words, the Fifth walked off, and I followed behind. The surroundings turned to grey, before being replaced with yet another scene.

It was within the mansion.

A woman in her late thirties, or perhaps early forties, was standing distraught in front of a door. There were servants around her.

『Just come out. It's already time for the carriage to leave.』

And up to those woman, the Fifth of memories… Fredricks strut, and kicked the door down.

『Don’t think I’ll put up with a child’s whims forever. Take her away.』

His men entered the room, and extracted a single young girl.

『I don’t want to! Why do I have to be married off to such a place! He’s an enemy, isn’t he! And he even laughed at you for being an arrogant upstart!』

As I stood unable to fathom the situation, the Fifth beside me explained.

『This one’s before I picked up the quilin. Those times were the worst. No, wait, my generation really was the worst. I’ve not a decent memory of them.』

The girl dragged from her room was around my age. No, she looked a little younger.

『Because I’m a mistress’ child… you’re going to make me marry into a household to mock me!? You’re the worst. Someone like you should just go die already!』

The young girl glared at Fredricks, but the man’s expression didn’t change in the slightest. The woman who looked to be her mother had an expression of sorrow.

『You bought off my mother with money, and spread around your children like produce… you upstart garbage! It makes me want to die, just knowing I’m your daughter!』

Her mother slapped her across the face.

Still with an unchanging expression, Fredricks spoke curtly.

『Hurry. You don’t have any time.』

The girl fell to her knees in the hallway, and burst into tears. Fredricks didn’t turn around.

And I saw it all.

“Now this one really is terrible. I get the feeling there’s a much better way to go about political marriages, isn’t there?”

Hearing my words, the Fifth nodded and affirmed them.

『Now you get it right? I used my children as political tools for marriage and succession. I’m sure the love I held for any single animal was more than that I had for my own children.』

The Fifth continued walking, and this time the scene changed to night.

There, a small child with gold short-cut hair was running around in what looked to be a white one-piece.

Her facial features could be taken as either male or female, but what was stranger than that was Fredricks himself.

The Fifth of memory played with the girl with a smile on his face.

“Oh, so you could still be kind to small children?”

The one beside me shook his head. And saying it was about time, he motioned for me to watch the child.

The running child took on the form of a quilin, before making a large jump, and landing by the Fifth’s side. She playfully nuzzled her forehead against him.

Her horn was retracted, and it was as if she was asking to be spoiled by a parent.

“… Eh?”

Well, it’s not like I couldn’t tell by looking. The quilin had taken on a child’s form.

『I looked into it a bit, but it seems that’s the reason that quilins can bring generations of prosperity to the houses that catch them. Whatever the

reason, females of the species can choose males of whatever race they want. Meaning those prospering houses married their mares.』

After looking at the current Fifth, I turned back to Fredricks pampering the quilin.

The quilin in its human form looked to be only five tops.

“So a fifty year old man laid hands on a five year old?”

The Fifth swung his fist down on my head with all his might. It hurt like hell.

『You goddamn fool! As if I could ever do anything like that, idiot!』

“But you said something about marriage and such, didn’t you!?”

As I was holding my head with teary eyes, the setting changed again. I had already seen many scenes of the Fifth’s children watching him dote over his animals and complain.

『Are those dirty beasts so much more important than us!?』
『A father that’s never even shown me a smile…』
『So I fall short of dogs and cats!? Say something already, damn old man!』

And still, he didn’t direct a smile at his children. The only memories I ever saw besides those of his animals were those of him immersed in his work.

And around five years after the quilin had been injured.

There, the Fifth and the quilin were conversing.

“I think it would have been easier if you just showed them in order.”

『… I’m trying hard to remember. The impact was too strong, and no matter how hard I try, those kids’ faces pop up. Deal with it.』

Within the stable, just as she had been before… the five year old child

rested her head in his lap, as he pat her back.

Comfortably laying herself out, she addressed Fredricks.

『Fredricks, be with me? I will be Fredricks' wife.』

Hearing that, he laughed amusingly.

『That so? So you'll take me? But you're still a child you know. Get a bit bigger, and I won't say I won't consider it. Your injury's all healed up, right, May?』

『Yeah!』

His grey hair had expanded, and he looked more weathered than before.

"… It's like a grandfather and granddaughter."

『And that's why I adequately dodged the subject. And wait, I think that's about all I remember. Even so, the truth of the matter is that I'm dead, and the quilin never returned to the Walt House… did she think I broke the promise?』

In that case, it's the Fifth's responsibility, but there's nothing I can really do. At this rate, I'll remain the man who pissed off a mystical beast by trying to kiss it.

Fredricks spoke.

『… Then it's best you leave this place. I can't buy any more time.』

Hearing that, May tilted her head.

The scene changed to a grassy field.

Foliage that grew to my waist. The wind was strong, and the sky was blue.

In a scene like that, Fredricks brought out May in quilin form, and

pointed up at the sky.

『Look, aren't those your friends?』

『Yep, I can see mommy!』

As if wary of them, the herd of quilin circled around the two of them.

『I see. I've been hearing a lot of rumors of quilin sightings in these areas. May, it's been a fun ride.』

Saying that, he lightly tapped the back of her neck.

『Fredricks?』

『May, the crown keeps insisting it has to see you. There's a high chance they'll take you off with them if they ever do. If you're caught, you'll be spending the rest of your life in a cell.』

『Fredricks. I want to be with Fredricks for the rest of my life.』

『And I as well. But I don't have any more time. Look, your family's waiting for you.』

Only when he voiced the word family, did Fredrick's expression turn strained. After May stood stagnant a while, one of the herd came down to the ground.

Perhaps it was May's mother. After staring at Fredricks a while, it retracted its horn, and approached May. The man looked over the scene in silence.

The mother returned to the sky, and May looked between her and Fredricks a few times.

『Hey, go with her.』

『But…』

『I'll be just fine. And I'm sure we'll meet again.』

『It's a promise. We'll meet again. I'll get bigger so I'm going to become Fredricks' bride.』

Fredricks nodded with a smile. And turning back a number of times, stopping in her tracks a number of times, May returned to her herd.

『Now go! You have your family with you. I'm sure you… be happier.』

Not shedding a tear for his children, Fredicks had water streaming down his face as he screamed for the quilin to leave.

I looked at that.

"I think I've gotten to understand a bit, but isn't this…"

『Perhaps she had been searching for me. I mean, it seems she was moving individually out of the herd. In that case, she must have noticed me. Good grief, she's kept that promise faithfully on her mind for decades, hasn't she.』

Seeing him act a little bashful, I…

"No, then just what should I do? There' no doubt she was hostile towards me."

『… If you talk it out, won't she understand? Don't worry, that child's a sharp one. Much sharper than those Shannon and Aria girls, I tell ya'!』

I scratched my head.

Returning to the conference room, I found the Sixth waiting, so I let out a complaint.

The Fifth had vanished, perhaps shutting himself in his room.

"I think I've gotten quite a good understanding of why you went AWOL and left the house."

Giving a bitter smile, he scratched his face with a finger tip.

『Well, I was a little wild back then. I got struck and thrown a number of times. Quite a bit happened when that quilin was involved. But looking back at it all, perhaps the Fifth's decisions had been right.』

Breathing out a sigh, and locking his arms, the Sixth lost himself in thought.

And he mumbled something to me.

『Lyle, how do you see the Fifth?』

"… Cold. An animal lover? Well, quite a questionable one to have as a father, at least."

『Or course. I also think so. I do, but you see…』

Perhaps thinking something didn't mesh, the Sixth resolved himself to something, and beckoned over to me.

『You're here anyways. Have a glance at mine too.』

And just like that, I was lead through the Sixth's door of memories.

The moment I stepped through it, I found myself in the Walt House's mansion.

A young Sixth was complaining to some women any of whom could have been his mother.

『You'll go along with a damn old man like that!? I'm leaving this house! Just have some other unfortunate lout succeed these bloody walls!』

In his teens… Fiennes shouted out, and was just about to burst through the doors.

A single woman stood, and disinterestedly…

『You stupid son! Not knowing anything, you take that tone to your father…』

Troubled by the woman's tears, Fiennes fled the room. And as he stood perplexed at the other side of the doorway, voices came from within.

Five women were talking amongst themselves.

『He'll understand it someday.』
『That man's the one who has it hardest.』
『But Fiennes alone is…』

Well, the other four women were attempting to comfort the one who had burst into tears.

(It seems quite different from what I imagined.)

I thought their relationship would be more strained, with more disputes over succession mixed in. But they got along quite fine.

Perhaps unable to forgive them for not criticizing the Fifth, Fiennes grit his teeth.

His expression contained true hatred for his father.

『What's the matter, Fiennes?』

The one to appear was a girl identical to Miranda… no, it was Miranda that took after the young Milleia.

The one set to marry into the Circry House, and become the ancestor to Miranda and Shannon. She watched her brother Fiennes with her golden eyes.

『I-it's nothing. I just couldn't forgive pops, so I protested a bit. And somehow, I'm the bad guy in all this… dammit, why am I even telling you all this.』

Watching the younger sister listen to the Sixth's earnest confidence, I

thought.

(She's quite steady for her age.)

Differing from Miranda, if I had to say, the impression she gave off was closer to Novem's. But her giggling gesture was one I had observed in the sisters I knew.

『You're always angry, aren't you, onii-sama. But just like that, father is always sad.』

Hearing that from his sister, Fiennes slammed his fist against a wall.

『That thing is sad? Like hell! He sees us as nothing more than objects. Maybe you'll be thrown away like a tool sometime soon!』

Casting her eyes down, Milleia…

『My eyes do not function, so I cannot even become a tool.』

Fiennes hung his head as well.

『S-sorry. But I've decided it. I'm going to leave this house.』

『Onii-sama?』

『That's right. How about I become an adventurer! I'll become a first rate adventurer in the future, and take up a job to smack that old man upside the face!』

Looking up at the tall Fienness, Milleia spoke.

『… I can't say I like how you are now either, onii-sama.』

With those words, she turned her back, and walked off.

Chapter 10: First Job in Beim

The village we spanned five days in Porter to reach, was one surrounded by wood and stone.

It had forests and mountains around, and those were likely the source of the timber. The village that's defenses were built off its terrain seemed somehow burlier than those I had come to know.

Dismounting from Porter, I headed to the gate with the necessary forms in hand.

The one on lookout, a youth from the village, had a bow strapped over his back.

After confirming we were dispatched from the Adventurers' Guild, he immediately let us through, Porter and all.

Clara looked around, a little surprised.

"The lookout was one thing, but seeing just how much effort they've put to defense… makes me question whether we're really needed here."

They were quite candor impressions, but I thought the same.

The one who came to greet us was a man who named himself as the chief.

His body was large, and his stomach stuck out a little, but the muscle of his arms was quite something. Looking over us, he made a bit of a doubtful face, before immediately bursting into a smile.

"Welcome. Thanks for coming all the way out to the sticks. Now won't you hand over the guild documents?"

I handed them over in an envelope, and he looked through them, nodding a couple of times.

As the individual who had put up the request himself, he looked at us and awkwardly scratched his head.

“An experienced party, is it? But you’ve got some tools I’ve never seen before in my life. Is that what’s in these days? And why do you even have a housekeeper with you?”

“Maid.”

“Eh?”

“Maid.”

“R-right.”

After glancing at Porter, he had turned his eyes to Monica’s uniform.

He pulled back a little at Monica’s insistence that she was not, in fact, a housekeeper. Perhaps writing her off as a girl with a screw loose here or there, he immediately changed gears, and turned to me- the party’s leader.

“I doubt you can relax standing in the middle of nowhere. We don’t have an inn, but there’s a building you can use for lodging. It’s maintained, so I’ll bet it’ll be a relatively pleasant stay.”

Following the man’s lead, I moved Porter along, as we walked through the village.

Just from what I could see, there were even villagers with weapons in their hand.

Noticing my expression, the chief gave a bitter smile.

“It may put you off, but please deal with it. It’s just some brats acting tough by carrying weapons in hand. And they can’t help but be wary when adventurers come.”

While looking at his back, I…

“Chief, were you an adventurer too?”

"… You can tell? Well then I'm thankful to the guild for sending a competent one."

Walking on with a smile, he gave off the impression of a veteran with an impressive record behind him.

(If it's just Gray Wolves, then wouldn't this man be able to handle it alone?)

If I just concentrated a little on my surroundings, I could discover former-adventurers scattered all over the place.

They were wary of us, and among them were even some sending antagonistic sentiment our way.

From the Jewel, the Third let his voice.

『There're all sorts of adventurers out there. I mean, there're some that'll start a ruckus if the reward is insufficient, and even some fools who'll try to threaten their requesters. Many don't differ much from the average bandit, so that's why they're so wary.』

The adventurer-hating Seventh agreed.

『You can never trust an adventurer. But I'm not sure what to think of those sending hostility towards Lyle. If he had to mind, he could very well wipe the village off the map.』

I could understand why they were so wary. They were probably anxious because they didn't know what sort of adventurers we'd turn out to me.

Of course, that sort of thing wasn't something they'd try to pick a fight over.

And after a while, the building used for lodging by travelers, merchants, adventurers and the like came into view.

The chief pointed out the building which was quite spread out, length-

wise, and had at least three whole entrances to it.

“Use that one however you will. Of course, break it and there’ll be trouble. And you, blue haired bro over there, you’ll be coming with me.”

He likely had some explanations to give regarding the Gray Wolves. I sent a glance at my comrades, and they nodded, so I accompanied the chief.

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At the chief’s house was a young and pretty wife, set apart ten to twenty years from the man.

The large house had two children, both of which hid and stared at me from the corners of the hallway.

Made of sturdy wood, perhaps it had been made quite recently, as the chief’s house was quite tidy.

The young and pretty wife brought out some tea, so we sipped it as we discussed.

“The atmosphere’s tense, right? Is it the first tim you’ve been in a situation like this?”

I had taken up a personal request to eliminate a Gryphon before. It didn’t get put on the records, but I fought a defensive battle at that village.

“It’s not my first, but that’s not to say I’m used to it.”

He smiled.

“I’ll bet. Your eyes were darting about, so I thought that was the case. Well, there was some risk on our side when you took it up, so please bear with it.”

After I nodded, the chief went into the Gray Wolves.

“Now then, about the request… a pack of Gray Wolves has been sighted in the nearby forest. We enter those trees for hunting and firewood, but it’s gotten dangerous so I’d like you to deal with them. And that’s about it.”

After staring at the chief a while, I looked at the weapons hanging on his wall.

Appropriate to his build, it looks like he was a vanguard warrior who swung a battle axe.

“Do you find it strange I don’t go out and kill them?”

“I do think there has to be a reason to it.”

“And sure enough, there is one. But it’s something like a custom or trend from a while back. And I’ve no intent to change it.”

The former adventurer chief sipped his tea, and began talking as if he had gotten a grasp of my character.

“You guys fought a bit on the way here, didn’t you?”

“Yes, I get the feeling it was a bit much, but we fought monsters a number of times.”

Hearing that, the chief looked delighted.

“That’s exactly it. Adventurers do plenty of hunting around Beim’s circumference, but they never venture out as far as here. The reason we call adventurers is to have them defeat the monsters on the way. Otherwise, the traders and travelers that stop by would be troubled.”

I was satisfied with that explanation. Sure, the chief alone could probably take care of the monsters around.

But then the ones inhabiting the road here would be left unchecked. In that case, anyone would hesitate to bring their feet to this village.

“So your goal was calling adventurers in itself?”

“That’s how it is. And to us, the peddlers are important. The adventurers get some hands on some money, and we essentially pay for safer travel for the traders and travelers. If you keep that on your mind, I think you’ll benefit when taking up requests.”

It appears there’s a benefit to it.

The chief offered up some more information.

“The pack’s in a nearby forest, but do you need me to guide you?”

The eyes he shot me were ones as if to test me. I shook my head.

With the Fifth and Sixth’s Skills, locating enemies was s eimple matter.

“I see. Then go out whenever you’re ready. And once you’re done, just call over to me. I have to confirm it, after all.”

Finishing up my confirmations, I stood, and remembered something.

“Come to think of it…”

“What?”

“About the real reason you won’t go out and do it yourself. Is there not at least one more?”

Making a tired expression, he…

“Now just try and tell those village folks that I could handle it myself. Those guys are way too frugal, and they’ll push me out to do it the moment they hear those words. I mean, even if they’re simple folk, they’ve got their strength, and clever ones are clever. But you can find idiots wherever you go. We’re not so troubled with money to have to send a retired and weakened body into the midst of danger.”

I felt those were his true thoughts, so I nodded with a smile.

A young wife, and two kids. It was a happiness too dear to needlessly risk losing.

With his retired body, the million-to-one chance he would lose his life existed. An irreversible mistake.

The Third let his voice out from the Jewel.

『Well, even if he explained his reasons to the village as a whole, there'll still be folks who won't understand it. And I'll bet they have some dissatisfaction with a former adventurer chief come in from some other land.』

Hearing his voice, I asked the chief another question.

"Another thing."

"You need something more?"

"Why are you serving as chief here?"

On my question, the man breathed out a sigh.

"It's not like I want to do it either, but around these, parts, having a connection to the guild is something convenient. Like being acquainted with nobles and lords in other lands, perhaps? That sort of thing. The fact they accept requests like these is also due to my connections. If played poorly some other villages are refused under the reasoning of, 'no adventurer'd ever accept that request.'"

The guild must be quite frantically allotting work on their side. But adventurers had their circumstances as well. And all it goes to show is that requestors have just as much going on.

"And you see, there's strength and all, but in Beim, it's those that understand how adventuring works that are the reliable ones. I'm quite reluctant here, but when the previous chief resigned, he pushed the post onto me."

The Fourth spoke up.

『It's because he understood the circumstances behind it that he shoved the work onto this man. Well, I doubt any retired adventurer trying to take it easy would ever want the position.』

The Fifth.

『But on the other hand, they wouldn't have that many aspirations for it, so they'd just do the work with minimal intervention. He may look like a minimalistic one, but when it comes down to it, the villagers here had enough money to arm themselves, at least.』

So it's just how things go in Beim.

In other places, people would fight over the chief position for personal interest. But here, it seems the tax was quite low, and the villagers themselves lived and prospered.

The Third spoke.

『To add onto that, this person's most likely your examiner. He's sure to report all the particulars. I mean, he even said he has connections to the guild. He's got more on his hands than I thought.』

His tone was as aloof as always, but he seemed a little happy having seen through it.

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While returning from the chief's house to the lodging building, I found the surrounding villagers to be concealing themselves.

(What? Why there of all places…)

From a certain location, they seemed to be observing me.

But it was strange no matter how you looked at it.

I headed for the place I was being watched from: the back of the building.

The lodging building had been equipped with bathing facilities, and those weren't closed off to the outside air.

Getting more information from the Skills of the villagers, I found that all of them were men.

When I sent them a glare, a few of them locked eyes from the platform they had purposefully made to hide.

And through my discovery of them, they frantically scattered…

"But it looks like the water's already been used."

There, Aria called out to me, a towel hung around her neck.

"Already finished on your end, pervert?"

The grinning girl likely had Clara prepare the water for her. She had wiped down both her body and hair.

Having just washed herself off, she'd get cold out there, so she should just come in already, I thought. But being called a pervert irritated me a bit.

By trying to kiss the quilin, I had been registered as a pervert in Aria's head.

From within the Jewel, the Fifth let out a rare emotional sentiment.

『… Seriously, why is that perverted? I can't accept it.』

He was angry about something strange.

(And you should look to things besides animals once in a while)

To her smile, I returned my own, and pointed at the place the villagers had been.

“What?”

“You got naked here, didn’t you?”

“And so? Isn’t it fine? I mean, I didn’t get to wash myself properly while we were on the move. If possible I’d even like to take a full bath.”

“You were being peeped on.”

“… Eh?”

Looking where I was pointing, she seemed to have noticed what was visible of the platform.

From its angle and whatnot, it was definitely made for the bathing area.

And if it was made to actually keep tabs on us, then I wouldn’t really mind, but that one was clearly a crime.

I thought she would turn bashful here, but…

“What of it?”

“…?”

I’m pretty sure I made quite an idiotic face there.

The Sixth also let his voice from the Jewel.

『… It’s no good. This girl doesn’t understand this and that.』

The Fourth too.

『She’s an adventurer after all. Perhaps she’s just fine with being seen naked at this point. In contrast, she does act strangely embarrassed before

Lyle, but… Lyle, just get stabbed in an alleyway already.』

The Third.

『As I thought, the end of a harem bastard's gotta go like that.』

Before my eyes, Aria put her hand to her mouth, and smiled.

"What? You irritated they got to see? Oh right~ Lyle's never seen a woman's naked body after all. Of course you'd be jealous."

I meant to tease her, but got teased in return.

But…

"What are you on about? You remember that time you fell asleep on the coach in your undergarments. They were coming loose, and I'm the one who draped the blanket over you, you know?"

Aria's face suddenly turned red, and she threw the towel in her hands at me.

"The hell are you looking at!?"

The soaked towel held quite a sense of weight as it hit against my face, and at the same time, it was quite painful.

Picking it up, I threw it back.

"You're the one who showed it off! It was getting embarrassing for me, so I went and covered it. Why not be a little thankful for that consideration!?"

"What do you mean embarrassed!? Even like this, I've got a bit of confidence in my body!"

Aria threw the towel again, so I caught it and returned it.

"As if I care!"

She caught it in midair, but as she had grabbed its edge, the main part made a slapping sound as it hit her face.

When I pointed and smiled, she glared at me for real.

“… Forget it! Forget my baren form!”

“Didn’t you just say, ‘what of it?’ or something like that!? Don’t worry about it, I can barely remember as it is!”

“You pervert!”

“If you don’t want to be seen, then fix that sloppy attitude of yours!”

And after a few more passes of the towel, the Seventh spoke from the Jewel.

『… You two sure get along.』

I couldn’t really agree with that one.

Chapter 11: Surroundings

Proceeding through the forest, I had Novem and Eva following along behind.

Miranda, Aria and Clara were moving in a separate group, as we circled around eliminating Gray Wolves.

Small packs of them dotted the trees.

Of course, it's not like we were too far away from Miranda's group. We occasionally let of flashes of magic to communicate with one another.

Though all we were really communicating was our locations.

(Perhaps we need to make some signals for when we move separately.)

It allowed enemies to find us, so I didn't really want to use it. But if I just led everyone, it would get in the way of Miranda, and Aria's growth.

And I wanted to test how things would go if we divided our forces.

The ground beneath my feet was quite uneven. The branches and grass that grew up to my hips impeded our progress.

I went forward while mowing it down with a dagger, but the sound of that attracted enemies.

Easy as the request was, the location was a problem.

In the past, I made sure to never get into a fight in a place like this.

"Alright, break time. Novem."

When I looked over to Novem, she held up her staff, and used it to produce magic light. After flickering it a few times, Clara reacted, and flashed her own in response.

We were to reunite with Miranda's group, find a suitable spot, and take a break.

Perhaps they were having the same problems as us, as their movement speed was low.

I chose to fight in the forest itself, because I thought it would make for good experience. There was also the matter of Eva.

She had originally lived in the forests, and had a certain affinity for them.

In the places so hard for us to traverse, she just kept going forward. She was sensitive to surrounding noises and smells, and quite quick to discover enemies.

And on top of magic, she could use a dagger and bow.

Even so, according to the individual herself, "I've still got a long ways to go if you want to compare me to the tribes that solely live among the forests."

(Yep, I'm never going to try and pick a fight with an elf in a forest.)

That on my mind, I looked to Eva.

"How about it? Sense any enemies?"

Our request was one to take our Gray Wolves, but it's not like that's all we found.

We've already encountered orcs and goblins a number of times.

"None, but is there really a need to ask me? Lyle, can't you already sorta tell where the enemies and dangerous spots are?"

Good of her to have noticed, but…

"No, I'm sure I already explained that I just have that sort of Skill."

Eva was as of yet unsatisfied.

“Then just what meaning do these actions hold!? Just find them all, and have us take them out already! Since you weren’t keeping it up, I was sure you were economizing your mana or something.”

While telling her to contain herself, I explained.

“Unlike you, we aren’t accustomed to the forest terrain. This is a good opportunity, so we’ll spend two days wandering it normally, is what’s already been discussed, is it not?”

We couldn’t just walk normally like the elf. In such a state, it would be a waste for me to use Skills and promptly take out the Gray Wolves alone, to get nothing out of the affair.

“And my goal is to defeat Celes. I want as much experience as possible. You can grow by repeating the same action over and over again, but differing environments and brand new personal experiences give off a different amount, or so I’ve heard.”

From the ancestors, of course.

The Second, who I can’t meet at present, was quite knowledgeable on the matter.

And using what he taught me, I thought it best to go out and experience new things, rather than repeating a routine.

This goes without saying, but diving into a labyrinth, and defeating monsters there is also a valid option.

As we are now, we can go out to experience plenty of new things, but quite a bit was wasted on movement time.

“Eva-san, you’ve looked quite sleepy since morning, but could it be you weren’t listening to any of our discussions?”

When Novem said that, Eva latched onto her.

“Forgive me, Novem. And when I practiced song yesterday, all the villagers came and gathered. They wanted to listen to me!”

Watching Eva speak as if asking to be pampered, I let out a sigh.

I already knew why she had stayed up late, and I had been awake as well.

Because the Seventh had been busy making a beehive of me time and again in the Jewel. I thought he would be sweet on his grandchild, but saying it wouldn’t kill me anyways, his attacks didn’t slow at all.

Each of the heads of history was, to put it bluntly, stronger than me.

It wasn’t their base specs, they all had made a fighting style of their own.

Swordsmanship was the same. I couldn’t beat the Third in that.

Compared to him, I somehow don’t get the feeling I fall short in technique. But when it came down to fighting him, he carried something that overwhelmed whatever difference in ability we had.

And as expected, they were skilled in using Skills.

They had each gained full mastery of the Skills they had manifested themselves.

I sensed a nearing presence, stood, and grasped my sabre’s hilt…

“Ah, a horned rabbit. Mine!”

By Eva’s bow, the approaching horned rabbit was pierced in its vitals the moment its head popped into view.

『… I… hate elves.』

The Fifth’s bitter voice came from the Jewel, but I ignored it and turned to Eva.

Ever since coming into the forest, her movements had changed.

“Do you get stronger within the trees? And wait, that’s quite some skill you have there.”

Her bow was a small one, but it was made for considerable output, and Eva used it masterfully.

“It’s not like anything’s changed about me. But I did enter these sorts of places a number of times, and mine’s an elf tribe that left the forest after all. We’re specialized to things like bows and such.”

She said that simply brimming with pride, so I…

“Yet for a tribe like that, you sure like to sing in such scanty attire. Do you make a hobby of exhibitionism?”

It was only then that we finally managed to reunite with Miranda’s group. While Eva complained at me, she went off to retrieve the spoils of the prey she took out.

“Attracting customers is a different matter altogether! And I don’t want to hear that from you, Lyle!”

Watching her stick out her tongue as she nimbly retreated into the forest, a mud-covered Aria…

“Elves sure get vigorous when they enter forests. I’m jealous.”

From the look of things, she’d been tripping quite a bit since she entered the woods.

Clara took a towel out of her bags, used magic to wet it, and handed it over to Aria.

Accepting it, Aria unloaded her equipment onto the ground, and began wiping herself off.

Novem was keeping watch of the surroundings, and was stationed a

little further from our circle.

Miranda reported the progress of her team.

“Three goblins, and six Gray Wolves. I do think it’s a bit much, but as expected, finding them is a trial. It’s quite horrendous when you’re attacked all of a sudden.”

In an unfamiliar environment, she was going through the expected troubles.

At present, we’ve done enough to satisfy the requested requirements, but I decided to stay here and build up some more experience.

With the horned rabbit in hand, Eva approached, looked at Aria, and…

“What, you fell?”

She began laughing.

“Oh shut it! Unlike you, it’s not like I was raised in the trees!”

With Aria’s usual bearing, and the mentality so as not to mind being seen naked, would she not fit into the forest soon enough? Or so I ended up thinking.

Eva shrugged her shoulders, a little sour, she tossed the spoils onto the ground, and took out a knife.

“Yes, in the end, I’m just an elf. Now then, you stab right here…”

Humming a tune, she began dismantling the rabbit.

From the Jewel came the scream of a bitter Fifth and the lament of a fed-up Third.

『I hate this womannnn!』

『Yes, well I hate you. How can you find those horned demons cute?

Good grief, I guess there's a reason why you fell for that quilin when its form was that of a little girl.』

I contained the urge to nod at the Third's cynicism, as I looked over the materials Miranda had collected.

Stripped monster parts and magic stones. Some were of good condition, while others worse for wear. It's likely some attacks missed their mark.

(Well, the earnings for this request don't really matter. Let's just get as used to the terrain as we can.)

With such breaks sprinkled around, we moved through the forest.

There…

"Hey, if we're going to be working apart anyways, then how about testing out Lyle's Skill? Connection, was it? Why not use it on me?"

On Miranda's sudden proposal, Aria burst out.

"W-what are you talking about!? It's a kiss, a kiss! What's more, an adult one!"

As Aria was thrown into a disarray, Clara adjusted her glasses, a little flushed in the face.

Novem seemed more concerned about me, as she sent a few glances in my direction.

And Eva looked at Novem.

"… Is there really a need to use it? It hasn't even been tested yet. Underestimate the forest, and you're in for a world of pain."

She held Miranda back.

From the Jewel, the Fourth…

『Well, if you've got over three humans gathered, then factions'll form. Oh my~ now's the chance for you to show off your Skills, Lyle. Fight on!』

(I don't need that sort of advice! Why not say something helpful at times like these!?)

I gripped the Jewel, and tapped it to get some suggestions. Third and up…

『I only had one wife. I no understand.』
『Same here. No idea how to manage multiple ones.』
『Do nothing. Over.』
『… It didn't go so well for me, I don't think I should give advice here.』
『I was faithful to Zenoire.』

The ancestors were of no help.

The air kept becoming more and more strained, and in that, Miranda smiled…

"Then let's go and test it after we return. I'm ready anytime."

And said that.

To match eye level with me as I say, she leaned in, and sent her smile right at me.

"N-no, well…! I-I don't have much experience in that, and…"

When I averted my eyes, stood, and tried to take some distance, Clara…

"Even when you tried to kiss the quilin?"

Several days had passed, and still I was treated as the pervert who pissed off a beast by trying to kiss it.

And I…

“Novem, you can take a break. I’ll take up lookout duty.”

… Fled.

I heard the clicking of a tongue followed by the words, ‘he ran,’ but Ignored all that, and switched out watch with Novem.

“Then I’ll leave it to you.”

“Yeah.”

Thanking me with a smile, she returned to the rest of my comrades. But after I left, the conversation was reduced to bits and pieces.

From the Jewel, the Third let out a bored-sounding voice.

『Tsk, how about you persevere a bit more, and provide some more entertainment?』

(Why do I have a need to entertain you all!?)

I contained my irritation, remained wary of the surroundings, and used a Skill.

To practice, I confirmed a scope greater than what I usually viewed.

The map came up in my head, and a number of red dots peppered it.

(There are still some Gray Wolves. If we go further into the woods, there seems to be a bigger pack. It’d be easier if they came out to meet us, though.)

While I thought that, I saw yellow and red, and the occasional blue, a complicated and changing dot.

When I turned in that direction, the source of it immediately distanced itself.

An ominous sweat dripped down my back, and I found a little relief at their retreat.

"… So she followed me."

That response was undoubtedly the quilin… May's.

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"For today's dinner, I've utilized the Chicken Dickwad's favorite chicken meat, and I'm thinking of making a stew of it. Now then, assistant Shannon-san, have you properly diced the ingredients?"

In the adventurers' and travelers' lodging building in the village, Monica and Shannon were preparing a meal for when Lyle's group returned.

If Shannon went into the forest, she would just be a burden. The individual herself understood that, and she didn't want to go in to begin with, so she used an excuse.

But that didn't mean she would be permitted to do nothing at all.

Under Monica's lead, she helped cook and clean for her comrades that were to return.

"Hey, you usually just call me Shannon, and treat me like a little girl, so why is it you add a –san the moment I become your assistant?"

"Hm, there's some beauty to be found in formalities. Now then ingredients… you little girl!!"

Monica looked at the vegetables Shannon had chopped, and raised a loud voice.

"W-what!? Isn't that fine? It's cute, is it not?"

The vegetables she had chopped had lost a large portion of their edible

volume to create star and heart-shaped cross sections.

But perhaps because they were carved out with a standard kitchen knife, they were a bit misshapen.

“Listen here, when you want to make a shape like that, you have to use a standard mold! The shape aside, discarding the remaining parts is… well, just cut them up finer, I suppose. Alright, fine, since you made them after all, be gentle when you put them in the stew.”

The fact she didn’t mince Shannon’s stars and hearts was Monica’s kindness.

“Leave it to me. These’ll be like a game for the ones that eat it.”

“We don’t have the prizes, or is that to say the shaped ones are both the game and the reward… now then, let’s start the fire…”

When Shannon tossed the ingredients into the pot, Monica once more…

“You fool!! What do you take cooking for, little girl!?”

“I mean, I’m usually on dishwashing, or peeling duty! I’ve helped, so isn’t it fine!?”

Her twin tails tangled, Monica was furious as she lectured Shannon.

“And teaching you cooking was the damn Chicken’s order! I, Monica am to put the maximum effort to, and bring about the greatest results for whatever he commands! Such is my directive! I’ll drive the foundation of housework into you, and until you’re perfect at it, I am resolved to even be called a demon.”

Shannon made a reluctant face at Monica’s resolved declaration.

And she looked behind her.

There, the village youths… rather, those twelve or thirteen of age. The boys were looking at Porter parked beside the building.

She had thought they were just looking into it, but the truth was different, it seems.

"Hey you guys, what are you doing!?"

When Shannon yelled, the boys ran in surprise.

Monica sighed, and restarted her cooking.

"Are you fine with that? Those boys came to steal something."

While taking care of the pre-cooking, Monica spoke to her.

"Porter's luggage door is locked shut. It is impossible to open. Even so, just what would they want to steal… could it be my work in progress, my Maid Uniform That Doesn't Stand Out!?"

Shannon made a cramped expression as she wondered whether the automaton was serious.

"No, won't the matter be resolved if you just part with the uniform altogether? Just what the hell is a Maid Uniform That Doesn't Stand Out supposed to be? The point was that maid uniforms stand out as it is."

Shannon also restarted her assistance, but using her eyes to take in the surroundings, she saw the boys still quite close.

They likely meant to hide, but Shannon could see them quite clearly.

And she could also understand they held feelings none too amiable.

Envy, fear, and contempt.

"It seems we aren't quite welcome here."

When Shannon said that, Monica…

"And *that* 's why your hands have stopped? If you don't do your work properly, I'll report it to Miranda."

“How underhanded! Automaton, how can you machines be so unfair!”

Monica scoffed.

“Hah! It is no concern of mine what any besides the Chicken Dickwad think of me. Unfair? Well that sure sounds like a compliment to me. What of it?”

Shannon and Monica seemed to be having fun as they cooked, but occasionally Monica put herself on guard as well.

Chapter 12: Wild Beasts

Within the Jewel.

While looking around, I simultaneously used Skills to process various bits of information.

The flickering blue dot, while there was only ever one, kept changing locations at a moment's notice.

Thought that's what it looked like, it was only that I couldn't perceive it…

The scene was a blue sky, and a straight road that went on without end.

"There!"

Sparks flew as I swung the sabre.

But in the next instant, a wave of pain washed over the left side of my stomach.

Dual daggers.

It was the same style as Miranda's, but the one to truly specialize in it was the Fourth Generation Head, 【Max Walt】.

His Skill, 【Speed】, was one to elevate movement speed.

When the Third was on the verge of death, it was one that manifested as the Fourth rushed to his father's side.

What emerged as its second stage was 【Up n' Down】. While raising one's own speed, it was one that allowed you to decrease an enemy's.

And…

“【Full Drive】 is just unfair!”

I was swinging my blade like crazy, but sparks only flew, and I felt impacts a number of times.

The only time I ever caught sight of the man himself was when I sensed his location with Skills, and turned knowing where he’d be.

And occasionally, I thought I saw two or three of him.

The sabre was parried, and it flew out from my right hand into the air. Immediately following, I felt an immense pain in my chest, sending my back flying into a nearby tree.

Seeing his position, I assumed he had done a body blow while piercing the dagger into my chest.

『Where I come from, unfair is a compliment. And having an enemy say that is simply too enjoyable for me to contain myself.』

While grinning, he pulled out another dagger.

A large amount of blood was flowing from my chest, and when I turned my eyes to the distance, I saw the very moment my sabre impaled itself into the ground.

Watching my sword disappear, I found my pained body had returned to normal. The blood that came out vanished as well, and wiping off my sweat, I stood.

I leaned against the tree, and watched him skillfully handle the dagger in his right hand.

“So the left one is for defense, and the right to cut. Was there something stopping you from using a larger weapon?”

Using an attack style the specialized in raw speed, the fourth thought a bit before shaking his head.

『Any more weight, and I wouldn't be able to wield them freely. At the same time, the elevated speed already raises the output enough. I have tested other things, but twin daggers is the most convenient. You can aim for gaps in armor and all.』

After sheathing his blades, the Fourth instantly raised his index finger to correct the placement of his glasses.

They reflected the light as I took a deep breath.

"Can you hold up, going so fast?"

『It's quite rough. I'm barely able to manage with the First's Full Over. And the Second's All lets me sense and aim for enemies. Put the Third's Mind to shake up foes on the way, and it's an easy kill.』

The Fourth's final stage Skill used the First's and Second's as their premise, it seems.

And the Fourth earnestly looked at my face.

『… Lyle, if you become able to use my Skill, perhaps you'll be able to surpass me. No, you have no choice but to surpass me.』

He thought back to the time I fought Celes in Centralle, and explained.

『Even if I was the one fighting, I probably couldn't win against that girl… against Celes. She wasn't serious at all, and yet that speed, and that power. If there really is only one in her Jewel, then it must be a considerable Skill she has. But my Skill is only feasible with the simultaneous use of others. Do you get what I'm trying to say?』

By Skill capabilities alone, I couldn't win out.

And the identity of the Skill Celes held has yet to be grasped by any of the heads, me included.

"She's definitely much stronger than me, is all I understand."

『It just goes to show that as you are now, you can't beat her non-

serious side. I've not the slightest on what her serious face looks like, but I can't imagine it being any weaker than what you've already encountered.』

The moment I decided to fight her, I had given up on winning with numerical prowess.

The reason we're currently raising our abilities is in order to create a situation where it would be possible to fight her.

It would be a herculean feat to prepare an army of tens of thousands, but the greater issue would be dealing the finishing blow on the girl.

With her ability to charm people, I'm sure she could escape no matter how large an army surrounded her. Perhaps if we could defeat her in ability…

『Don't be so scared. We'll give advice to prepare the stage, and I'll do my best to raise you high enough. It's just that there's no point to it if you're to die. Please don't forget that.』

When I nodded, the surroundings faded to gray, and began to wither away.

My conscious gradually returned to reality, and when I opened my eyes, I was in the building in the village. The sun was beginning to show itself, and the landscape was visibly beginning to brighten.

Around, the villagers had already begun to move, and I could hear voices in the distance. The barking of dogs, and the sounds of life.

I touched my chest, but I wasn't injured at all.

But my body was quite covered in sweat, so I took a towel, and exited the building.

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I stretched, washed my face, and rinsed out my mouth before confirming that the chief was on his way here.

Down the lone path that lead here, the chief was making a sullen face so early in the morning.

“I apologize for yesterday. I confirmed last night, that some of the village kids did try to fish through your belongings.”

The reason for all this was the young boys who had tried to steal when Shannon and Monica weren’t looking.

Hearing the story from Shannon, I immediately went to the chief’s house to give a report.

Telling him to look into it, I had given a list of the boys’ characteristics only yesterday.

(He sure acts fast.)

“It’s because the seconds and thirds weren’t to succeed their houses. They thought to run off and become adventurers, it seems.”

Hearing that, the Third let his voice from the Jewel.

『It’s good it ended at an attempt. Neither side need be too riled up. But it’s the same no matter what time you look at.』

I decided not to put my mouth into it as long as none of this continued.

“So they were trying to get hands on some equipment? Well, we haven’t actually lost anything, so there’s no real problem. The surveillance tower’s been burned already anyways.”

When I reported the peeping tower, the chief made an enervated expression.

“It’s a lifesaver that you’re all such nice folks. Those villagers really don’t understand what they’d get in return if they did that to an ill-tempered

bunch. Hah, I want to quit this job already."

I gave a bitter smile.

"Why didn't you refuse becoming chief?"

In ill humor…

"My homeland's a far one, and I didn't have too much a mind to return to it. Having just settled here, do you think I could refuse? Familiar as I was with the countryside, I had my share of troubles. Dealing with people, or how should I put this, the customs are all mostly a pain. Got all that pushed on me as the newbie here for a few years, and finally I've been accepted, more or less. If you plan to spend a quiet life in the country when you retire, then I recommend you pile up more money than I did, and get a house in some large town somewhere."

The Third voice agreement.

『It really is hard to get accepted by villagers. Like accepting immigrants is a trial in itself.』

… Not that it's relevant to me at this point.

"If I make it big, that's what I'll do. Well, I'm sure it'll be more a trial to live that long."

"Right you are! But you're probably headed somewhere nice. By my instinct, that is."

And after I told him the state of the Gray Wolves, and the forest, we parted.

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We entered the forest with even smaller numbers than before.

On top of Shannon and Monica, Novem and Clara were also to rest this time.

Eva at the head, me, Aria and Miranda raced through the forest.

Our goal this time was to maximize movement speed, and to take down the small packs scattered about.

Pressing on ahead, Eva…

"Be careful of the roots."

She moved at the front, and if there was anything to note, she would call out.

Trying to imitate her movements, with yesterday's fatigue still withstanding, the three of us were plagued with dull movements.

Aria even…

"I'm getting muscle pains in strange places."

She complained as she took out a dagger to cut the vines and grass in the way.

Miranda looked around.

"Treat all that stuff as traps. Tree roots and rocks and mud pits… perhaps it was selected as a test *because* it was such a troublesome request."

Walking ahead, Eva held up a hand to us, took an arrow from her quiver, and readied her bow.

We lowered our stances, and took out our weapons of preference. A rustling sound was audible.

The sound of breathe, and the smell of beast.

I could tell it was a Gray Wolf, but Aria and Miranda were different.

“Is something coming?”

Aria glanced over her surroundings.

“I want to promptly take out all the Gray Wolves, and return quickly. I don’t like fighting in woodlands.”

She was looking in the direction of the enemy, with daggers in both hands.

And a low growl started coming to my ears.

(So they’ve discovered us as well.)

Not having the form of a wolf for nothing, it was blessed with a sharp sense of smell.

The Fifth from the Jewel.

『Who could have thought it would be so painful.』

Likely due to its canine form, he found it hard to watch the scene whenever we defeated one. While chastising him a bit mentally, I looked at the Gray Wolf that leaped out of the thicket.

The first one to leap out was pierced by Eva’s arrow, and collapsed on the spot.

The second leapt at Aria, who was slow to react, so I went up front and brought my Sabre up diagonally to cut it down, using the forward motion to swing downwards and kill the one trying to bite at my legs.

Miranda threw her dagger, bringing a swift end to another of them. With her short spear in hand, Aria stepped forward, and used her Skill to impale the Gray Wolves leaping out of the brush one after another.

And like that, the pack of seven monsters was promptly dealt with.

“So that’s twenty to thirty just around the entrance. There may be more further in.”

I left Aria to lookout, wiped the blood off my blade, and sheathed it. Miranda and Eva went to collect the materials and magic stones, so I helped lookout.

Looking around..

(She’s still watching.)

Expanding the scope of the Skills, I confirmed the presence of a flashing red quilin, occasionally changing to blue or yellow.

Feeling that I discovered her, she escaped to the very edge of my perception as she watched us… no, watched me.

And having finished gathering materials, Eva spoke.

“Oh, don’t lay a hand on the next ones.”

As she said that, the smell of a beast entered my nose once more. But this time, it wasn’t a monster.

Real wolves.

A few of them were observing us from a thicket, and I was able to confirm the existence of a female with children nearby.

Animals that could live in monster-infested forests were, quite frankly, a bother.

They were strong. Quite plainly strong.

Not living in dangerous lands for nothing, unlike the monsters that suddenly came to be, they had their strength built up from square one.

Eva took some meat from a pouch at her waist, and tossed it.

One of them emerged from the foliage sniffed the meat and latched on.

After looking at the Gray Wolves we'd taken out, it returned to its hiding place.

In that space, the other ones had moved to locations easier to attack us from, but when their comrade had safely returned, they retreated.

Aria took a deep breath, and wiped off her sweat.

"I can't tell them apart at all, you know? And wait, if they did attack us, it'd be alright to fight, wouldn't it?"

Eva refuted.

"Just make sure it doesn't come down to that. It's because those children exist that the monsters don't pour out of the forests. And unlike these guys, they're a real pain."

Having stripped off all the materials, Eva pointed at the bloody lump of meat before her.

Miranda looked around.

"I heard you brought meat around with you, but it was to tell them apart, I see. I honestly thought you were going to poison it."

… How fitting of Miranda? Perhaps?

"Stop right there. It's because humans do things like that, that the wolves are so wary. Well, it did make sure to sniff it first, so perhaps that sort thing has been happening here."

Aria tilted her head.

"What sort of thing?"

Eva stood, and removed her bloodstained gloves.

"Traps to take out, not monsters, but the wolves and bears. They're quite smart, and it seems they were considerably wary of us. Perhaps that village is the cause? If there were more of them, then we wouldn't be

finding any monsters out here."

If we didn't have an elf among us, I doubt they'd even come anywhere near us.

Miranda agreed.

"I heard that laying traps unattended was banned, but I see… the forest has its own circumstance."

Eva nodded.

"Well, it's not like they never attack humans. When it comes down to that, be prepared to be fighting a distinguished military veteran."

But Aria was…

"I'd like to fight one, at least once in my life."

… Said something like that.

(She's getting a little scary.)

The beasts were one thing, but my allies were also scary.

I resolved to never get into a fight with wolves, bears, or party members, but in the first place, didn't have a single comrade with me I could safely make an enemy of.

Before I noticed it, I was in a situation where it would turn dangerous no matter who I angered.

(Huh… wait, aren't I in a bit of a tight spot here…)

I shook my head, thrust such thoughts away, took a canteen from the bag hung around my waist, and took a swig of water.

And…

"… What should we do? I can't just let us be followed around

forever.”

Looking in the direction I thought the quilin May was hiding, I wiped off my mouth.

Chapter 13: Additional Request

We only noticed the crimson tint of the sky after we had left the forest.

After exiting the space of the dimly lit woods, the cold wind was blowing more violently then usual.

Covered in blood and grime, we wanted to return and wash our bodies with all due haste.

Slinging my leather bags of materials back over my back, I started walking, and Miranda, Aria and Eva followed behind.

I looked at everyone's expressions.

Eva was tired out from having to lead a group unaccustomed to the forest.

And Miranda and Ariwere tired, having been lead around a forest they were unaccustomed to.

(Yeah, let's take a break tomorrow. We have to finish off the rest of the Gray Wolves soon, and leave the village.)

I decided to spend a day regaining the party's stamina, and examining equipment.

But my real intentions behind such a break wasn't because of our fatigue.

(And wait, I'm also quite worn.)

An unfamiliar space really was something horrid.

Our movements had improved over the two days we spent, but our clothing was a mess.

Walking around the woodlands, and proceeding down paths without

paths was a pain.

Sweat, and mud and blood stuck my clothes down to my skin. I wanted to wash them quickly, as we brought our heavy bodies towards the lodging building.

While that was going on, Eva…

“Hey, make sure you properly report it. Otherwise this place will be overflowing with monsters someday.”

Having sensed an extreme lack of animals in the forest, Eva wanted me to report the fact to the village chief.

And having her bring it up directly wasn’t really an option.

The chief himself may be fine with it, but I can’t think the villagers will take her opinion seriously. Compared to humans, elves were a race with a weaker social standing.

And this was also my job as the party’s leader.

“I got it. After I change, I’ll head off to the chief’s place. But you should come along too. I can’t fully explain it myself, so I’d appreciate some supplementation.”

The one who felt something off in the forest was Eva after all. Even if I tried to explain it, I didn’t really get it as it was. And I’m doubtful I could make it sound convincing.

Based on how it goes, the important folks of the village may be gathered up. If it came down to that, I’m uncertain I would be able to get the message across.

“I want to hit the sack already, but I guess that’s not how it’ll go… fine.”

Eva agreed, so I went on.

“We’ll rest tomorrow. Two full days of activity is hard on the body.

Let's see how it goes, and rest a day or two. Should we just put the report off to tomorrow then?"

She glared at me.

"This one should be taken care of ASAP."

It appeared to be more serious than I thought, so I apologized.

Aria…

"Then after changing, I'll finish my equipment maintenance by the end of the day. I want to take tomorrow easy."

Miranda was…

"It would be nice if there was some place here of interest to see, though. Come to think of it, you were singing songs on the first day, right Eva? Gonna do it again?"

Eva made a bit of a difficult expression, and put her hand to her brow.

"I was cautioned after that, so I have to get the chief, and some other' permission next time. It seems there were some villagers who abandoned their duty to listen. That was a mistake on my part."

When badgered by the kits into singing, it seems the adults gathered as well.

Because of that, Eva received a warning.

(But that talk's never been brought to me.)

Perhaps someone personally went to warn her.

"Then since we're going to his house anyways, let's go get permission while we're at it."

Eva smiled.

“Really!?”

“Well, as long as you don’t push it. As long as you rest your body and check up your equipment, I’ve nothing to complain about.”

From within the Jewel, I heard the Fourth’s voice.

『So you’ve finally gotten all the way here, my boy. At the start, you had no concern for others, and kept bringing trouble to Novem. You sure have grown, Lyle.』

He was quite purposefully making a weeping voice.

In contrast, the Third laughed.

『But he’s still got so many hopeless points even after growing. His first evaluation was just so low, that the smallest changes are too noticeable.』

The Fifth.

『… Personally, I think getting to deep into it is a bad idea, though. Listen here, you have to equally follow through with everyone. Call out to them, and pay mind to their conditions and such. Make sure you don’t forget it.』

He sounded extremely worried.

I found it surprising, as I set off towards our lodging.

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When I took Eva and headed to the chief’s house, I found they had just finished up a meal.

Thinking it would be troublesome if I went while they were in the

middle of it, or cooking, I had aimed for that time, and it seems I came up right.

When we entered the house, the chief told his wife to prepare a drink, and asked us what it was this time.

"Now then, what's the problem? Is some idiot peeping or stealing again?"

I explained the situation with Eva.

"The truth is…"

He listened with an earnest expression.

The moment we finished up the story, his wife came in with a warm drink, as if aiming for the moment.

I said my thanks as I accepted it, and sparingly poured the hot liquid down my mouth tired from speaking.

It was too hot for Eva. She blew over the top a few times.

"… How thorough of you. No wonder the Gray Wolves've been multiplying in number. It wasn't always like that, you know."

It seems Eva wasn't the only one sensitive to the forest's irregularity.

It was an important matter for the villagers that lived beside it.

Satisfied, it seems the man had an idea of the cause.

He put his hand to his chin, and nodded a couple of times.

"Any ideas?"

"… There were those idiots gunning for your gear, right? Those guys've been going into the forest a lot as of late. Now that act in itself isn't anything rare, but they've even been carrying weapons along. Now there isn't a noble or lord here, so the necessary food stock can be decided

by city. We're relatively abundant here, and there are quite a few who use that abundance to purchase weapons. So they're likely sneaking those arms out from their houses, but…"

The fact that farmers in service to Beim were prospering, and that they held weapons was something I'd confirmed since coming to the village.

The chief made an unpleasant face.

"Traps, was it? I've made sure to teach them not to leave them unattended, but… dammit."

By his inference, they were likely going out fighting monsters to experience Growth.

The fact that monster slaying made one stronger was well-believed in these parts. With the amount of adventurers present, there was enough proof in those that'd experienced such a phenomenon.

And…

"They ended up taking out not monsters, but beasts. Destroying the forest's balance is dangerous, so I did tell them not to raise a hand to them, but… can they not tell them apart?"

… What was the difference between living beings and monsters?

The answer most people give to that one is the presence of magic stones.

If you find a stone in it, it's a monster.

Otherwise an animal.

If you want to confirm it, go kill one and check its contents.

As a result of trial and error, I'm sure plenty a beast had fallen in a monster's place.

Being a village by the forest, their knowledgeability on the matter of

traps was their downfall.

Whatever wolf ended up snared was likely taken out as a group.

If magic stones were found, they were carried back, otherwise, the body as just left.

And by sight alone, perhaps they only saw it as slaying monsters.

The chief looked bitter.

“It’s my mistake. Sorry, it’s a lifesaver you were able to tell. But the guild’s sure sent a splendid party.”

Everyone went silent, so I tried getting permission for Eva’s song. But the chief shook his head.

“Sorry, tomorrow’s no good. It’s not ‘cause we don’t like it or that she’s an elf or anything like that. Tomorrow’s gonna be kangaroo court for all the idiots we’ve gathered up. We’re gathering up all the villagers and celebs. We’ve got to make sure the same thing doesn’t happen again, after all.”

(Do you really have to go that far?)

When I thought that, it seems the Third had caught on to my doubt.

He let his voice from the Jewel.

『… There’s no helping than an idiot will surface now and again, but if they’re not made out as fools, the village will easily crumble. The methods’ll change from place to place, but they have to make sure another idiot doesn’t do the same idiocy.』

The Sixth.

『And even if those idiots go through hell, it will all just repeat if the generation shifts. Even if you teach them, idiots will perpetuate idiocy.』

And to him, the Fifth quietly…

『… I've said it once, and I'll say it again. When you ran away like that on a whim, you lack any persuasive power.』

Letting the ancestors' conversations slide, I glanced at Eva.

Thinking there was no helping it, she didn't seem to mind it all that much. More so, the fact he was so serious about the matter was likely something to rejoice over.

"Sorry. This is our livelihoods, or how should I put it, our life's on the line here, so please put up with it."

And with those words from the chief, we returned to our comrades.

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The next day.

For once in quite a while, I didn't have a death match with an ancestor, and was able to sleep soundly. When I awoke, the sun was high in the sky, and I could hear my comrades' voices around.

I rose and stretched. My body still felt heavy from the built up fatigue.

"Did the village already finish their conference?"

Muttering that, I walked outside. Monica noticed me and approached.

"To only wake up just before noon, what a man you are. Please think of the maid who does the cooking and cleaning, won't you? With such a goddamn useless master to serve, you're making me weep tears of joy, dammit."

So is she angry, or happy?

Monica presented the package in her hands to me.

“What’s this?”

“There’s still a little time to noon, so have a light breakfast. When your done, hand it to the little girl hiding in Porter, and tell her to wash it.”

I opened the lid to find a sandwich within.

I took it in hand, and took a bite. It was quite moist and tasteful.

“So why is Shannon hiding?”

“Hm, when I told her there was no concept of rest in housework, she burst out that it was unfair she was the only one without a break… oh, I’ll be giving my all to make lunch, mind you, Chicken Dickwad!”

While thinking that the usual was fine, I finished the sandwich, and gave my thanks.
I took the container, and went over to Porter.

Looking around, it seems Novem and the others had gone out.

The door to Porter’s loading area was open, and Clara was sitting out of it, reading a book.

It was one of the many books she had purchased for the trip.

And over the trip, she had finished them all.

“Rereading?”

When I called out, she nodded.

And looking at the contained in my hands, she turned her eyes to the girl wrapped in a blanket deeper in the golem.

She’s asleep. Miranda-san invited her to go around to see the village, but she returned in the middle of it, and she’s been like that since.“

Returning alone, she hid and fell asleep.

I hopped onto the loading area, and walked over to Shannon.

And there, Aria came running.

She was running off in Monica's direction, and in a loud voice, she…

"Monica, is Lyle up?"

Seeing her bearing, Monica understood it was an urgent matter.

"He's gone into Porter's loading tray, but did something happen?"

Aria approached where Porter was parked. Monica followed along.

When it was unpleasantly cold, Aria was sweating.

"Lyle, the guys you brought up yesterday fled. What's more, they went into the forest. The chief has something to talk about with you, he said."

I hopped off Porter.

"The chief? What business does he have with me?"

I headed off to his house with Aria, telling Clara and Monica to stay on standby.

And on the way, I saw the adults of the village were also in quite a panic.

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When I arrived at the chief's house, I met up with Novem, Miranda and Eva who were waiting there for me.

The wide space of the building was filled with the notable names of the village, making it feel much narrower.

With a tired expression on his face, the chief addressed me.

“Sorry, having you come here again. The truth is I’d like to supplement my request.”

Hearing it was about the request, I looked around.

The adults were resentful, and my party had dubious expressions floating over their faces.

“What are the contents of this amendment?”

Unless I heard it out, I couldn’t decide whether or not to take it, so I decided to finish with that first.

The Contents…

“I’d like you to catch and bring the runaway idiots back. We witnessed them go all the way to the forest, but it will be difficult for the villagers to search for and find them there.”

The villagers cried out.

“Increasing the monster levels, just what are those kids thinking?”
“Chief, ain’t you bein’ a little too lenient here? This’s why I said to exile them and be done with it.”
“Running off with the village’s money… this falls under your jurisdiction and responsibility, chief.”

After words of dissatisfaction against the chief, they began to appraise us.

“And are you fine with these adventurers? They’re just woman and children, right?”
“When the last chief was around, they always sent the competent ones.”

From our ages and appearances, we surely didn't look like seasoned adventurers.

But it didn't feel nice to have that one pointed out.

The chief let out a sigh.

"I'll prepare the reward for the additional request personally. I'll clean up the mess, so you all can go home for now."

The villagers grumbled their complaints as they filtered out of the house.

A few of them took a few glances at his wife.

All that remained was a man slightly younger than the chief, and us…

The chief slammed on the table, and glared at the door.

"God dammit! Even when they usually do nothing at all, they all get together at times like these! Who's wife you think you're flirting with; bastards the lot of you!"

He was quite vexed, and payed particular attention to the glances sent at his wife.

The remaining man looked to be in his thirties.

"Chief, you've got to proceed talks here. I'll listen to you complaints over your next drink, alright?"

"S-sorry. Right, can I leave it to you? In the worst case scenario, as long as you can reclaim the money they took, I'll consider the matter settled. If you can't, then that's alright too, but if you feel up to it next you enter the forest, please search for them."

Searching for kids in the vast expanse of woods, now that the monsters had increased in humbers, was a harsh task even for adults.

The reward was even greater than what was stolen, lest he risk us not

giving it back.

On top of that, if we brought back the young men, we would receive an additional reward.

As I accepted the quest, I addressed him.

“It must be hard, being chief.”

“Hm? Ah, this is just the norm. Even when they’re aware they can’t satisfactorily complete these jobs, nor do they have the authority to get adventurers dispatched all the way out here… it’s only at times like these, that they bring headaches to a former adventurer like me. Their treatment of idiots is too harsh, and because I’m an outsider, they think they can treat me the same. That’s why I didn’t want to do it.”

I began to sympathize with his environment, in which he was mouthed off at no matter what he did.

Then why did he decide to take up residence here to start with?

I questioned it a bit, but then I remembered my past conversation with him.

He said if I earned more, I should buy a house in a nice neighborhood. Perhaps he meant for me to make it big.

“Are the other villages no good?”

Understanding the meaning of my question, he shook his head.

“They’re all the same. The popular places all cost money. Even places where you need a fortune just to take up residence. Therefore, I chose a village where I could live cheaply, but… dammit, even if I knew it, it sure is aggravating.”

The Man in his thirties.

If you’re a true adventurer, make sure you can earn a lot.“

After confirming all the details of the request, we left the building.

And I could hear the chief's lamentations behind me.

Chapter 14: Solo

… Inside the forest.

The boys who had run off with the money watched over their surroundings as they counted the coins.

Within the dimly lit trees, the cries of birds created an uncanny air.

“Hurry up!”

On the urging of one of them, the boy counting them spoke.

“Fifty silver. No doubt about it!”

They were funds gathered for the sake of the village. And the boys had known where it had been kept.

The adults pressing down on them due to their carelessness in hunting beasts destroying the balance of the forest, they had resolved to head for more urban lands.

The money for such a venture had come from the village’s coffers.

“Okay, if we’ve got that much, we can make it in the city.”

The city… if they managed to make it to a city, they thought it would work out one way or another.

“It was the perfect chance to part from those noisy adults. Even so, that outsider’s high-and-mighty act sure was irritating. Even when he wasn’t that great an adventurer at all.”

The outsider likely referred to the chief.

From their point of view, the chief had lost out in life, having to spend the rest of his years in that village. The adventurers they had pictured in their minds were those who built up estates in the urban districts, and lived

elegant lives.

“Pops and big bro said it. That he was so low class as an adventurer, that we only ever get those frail-looking sorts dispatched here.”

While laying out complaints against the head, they preciously held the money tight as they began thinking up plans for things to come.

“Hey, how are we going to leave the village from here? Even if he have money alone, it’s not like that instantly turns into food or equipment.”

The three boys all seemed to have the same answer on their minds.

“Isn’t it obvious? There’s a perfect place to borrow it from.”

They had not the gear to travel.

Of course, the method they thought of was to take Lyle’s party’s equipment under the pretense of borrowing it.

“Taking around so many women, I hate that guy. That chief as well, homely as he was, he gets such a beaut for a wife. That’s definitely where his money went.”

Being second and thirds with weak standing to begin with, they had grown to dislike their lives in the constrained village.

At times they would hear tales of the city’s adventurers from the passing peddler, and at some point, those stories had entered their dreams.

But reality wasn’t so forgiving.

While the villagers of Beim were relatively plentiful, they didn’t have much a sum to spend on the independence of a second son.

Having long since given up on reclaiming some land and getting a field on their hands, the three of them only ever helped in farm work, and hadn’t put a serious effort to it.

No fields or houses to be left to them, the answer to their

independence came as adventuring.

That if they became adventurers, they believed with baseless confidence that they would win out. Of course, it's also true a large majority of adventurers were as oblivious to the truth as they were.

It's one of the reason the number of reckless adventurers doesn't ever seem to decrease.

"Hey, then what comes after getting the equipment? Walking to the nearest village will take at least two days, you know."

One of the boys purposefully brought the bag of silver up to eyelevel, and shook it to produce a clattering sound.

"If we manage to get that far, we can buy food stock with the money. If we board a wagon while we're at it, we'll be in the city in no time."

With the image of their independence in a city of dreams on their minds, smiles surfaced over their faces.

"Then we'll infiltrate when night comes to fall. We should be fine as long as we don't enter the deeper parts of the forest."

As Lyle's group had started going around the woods, the number of monsters around the entrance had decreased considerably.

If they just waited until night, it would work itself out, they thought.

"In that case, we've some time on our hands."

They divvied up the bread and water they had brought when they fled, and brought it to their mouths. While munching on the hard and dry bread, they looked to the weapons on their waists.

"Het, if we collect up some materials and magic stones, we can sell them at our next stop, right?"

When one said that, the other two looked turned eye to the sack of silver.

It was a fortune from their eyes, but if possible, they didn't want to have to touch it until they reached their destination.

The money was what they'd use to procure equipment as adventurers.

So economizing it was important for good gear.

"… We have the time, so let's at least earn a meal or two."

And so the boys dove further into the forest…

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Having received an additional request from the chief, I examined my equipment and fastened it on to prepare to enter the forest.

As I planned to go in alone, Miranda looked over me with a tired expression.

"You did indeed accept it, but you don't have to push yourself to go in now, do you?"

Confirming the weapons at my waist- a spare sabre, dagger, and knife- I tucked a robe into my bag.

"They're just loitering around the entrance area, so we should catch them while they're still there. It'll be troublesome if we end up finding nothing but corpses, after all."

Sarcastically quipping at my kindness, she continued watching me.

"Take me or Eva along."

The only ones who could sufficiently move around the forest were Miranda, Aria and Eva the elf. But the challenge didn't really call for that

much.

“If the three runaways are headed deeper in, I can drag them out. And I have Skills on my side.”

I held up the Jewel, and Miranda spoke.

“… Don’t push yourself. And make sure you speak up about whatever you’re hiding some time. I won’t ask again until you’re ready to say it yourself.”

Watching her back as she walked away.

(She noticed…)

I scratched my head, and took my hands off the Jewel. The Fourth spoke.

『Looks like there was no meaning inlying about kissing the quilin. It’s best you begin preparing an environment where you can get the message across.』

The Sixth.

『Right. Not that it has to come right away.』

I didn’t think it really made a difference, but because of Shannon, I couldn’t go on without explaining it. Last time was bad timing, but once things calm down, I should prepare a time to talk about it.

Explain it all properly in order, and make sure they have no doubts on the matter. That the Jewel in my hands was different from the one in Celes’…

At that time, I thought.

(So what exactly *is* different between mine and hers? Celes definitely said something about mine being a fake or a failure or something… the purpose of a Jewel is to record one’s Skills, isn’t it?)

I shook my head, and set my train of thought towards recovering the three boys.

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Entering the forest alone, I could walk around fine due to Eva's instruction.

I wasn't completely used to it, but with my Skills, I could proceed without getting lost, and while avoiding all monsters.

Before I had stepped in, the three had begun to proceed deeper.

"But it looks like I'll be able to catch up."

It seemed I could catch up to them before they entered a dangerous area, so I continued pursuing.

The map that popped up in my head, notifying me of friend or foe, was something quite suited to adventuring work.

It's proof of just how proficient the Fifth and Sixth's Skills were.

As I followed their trail, I discovered a corpse on the path.

It was a Gray Wolf, and perhaps they had given up on removing the pelt half-way through, and only the magic stones had been stripped.

"Terrible."

It's not that the monster was in tatters or anything, their material extraction was terrible. They didn't now the basics.

"The fur is actually the highest-selling piece."

If you want to speak of prices, the pelt was the most valuable item on

it.

From one who had gotten used to an adventurer's life like me, I could only think it a waste. More importantly, what interested me was…

"If they already swiped the money, why do they have to head deeper in? No, in the first place, have they even made preparations for their escape?"

Could it be they had planned this all beforehand, and hidden supplies in the forest's depths? I really don't think they thought it through that much.

Monsters began gathering around them, and oblivious to that fact, they were huddled around something.

"They're gathered around a beast? It's a trap!"

The beast had been there from the beginning, but I hadn't noticed it had been snared in a trap.

I ran forward, cutting down the vines and weeds as I hurried on.

There…

"… That can't be."

Understanding the present state from my Skills, I hurriedly raised my speed.

From the Jewel as well, came a voice of surprise.

It was the Fifth.

『May…』

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… Surrounding the animal, the boys looked over its lifeless body, and let out a collective sigh.

“The hell? Not a single magic stone n’ it.”

Splashed with a spurt of blood, one of the boys vexingly wiped off his hands and clothes with a cloth.

The reason for their irritation was the time spent on the task, versus the lack of any tangible reward.

“Told you ya’ can’t tell them apart.”

“And wait, these guys attack us all the same, so why do we have to treat them with care?”

Passing by one of the traps they had laid a while back, they had coincidentally found a wolf snared.

They had surrounded it and taken its last breath, but it was more tenacious and troublesome than any Gray Wolf.

“How much was two magic stones again?”

“Ah~ I get the feeling I got around a large copper last I…”

When they leisurely turned to leave the area, a thunderbolt suddenly fell.

It was followed by the rumbling of the earth, and a pale light brightened the area.

Looking up, the small bits of sky they could see through the gaps in the branches and leaves was as bright as day.

“What? What’s going on?”
“Oy, you’re not telling me a troublesome monster showed up or something, right?”

“F-for now, let’s run!”

A monster that could use magic came out? Arriving at that conclusion, they quickly turned to run. But before they noticed it, in the gap between them stood a girl of small build.

She was a girl severely lacking in a sense of reality.

Her clothes were of a sort they’d never seen before.

Her white garments showed off the shoulders and navel. No, it’s just that the spaces around the breast, hip, and down both arms were each covered by a separate piece of fabric.

The cloth around her chest and wrapped around her hips gave quite a firm definition of her body. Narrow waist, and a protruding bust.

A small rump at that.

(TL: This is what happens when Lyle is not narrating)

Even with such garments, what hung over her arms was so loose that they even covered up her hands. Her feet were in sandals, and down to her knees, a belt was coiled around like a web.

Her short golden hair swayed, as she exited the gap between the three, destroyed the metal digging into the wolf’s legs, and held up the bloody animal to her body.

The three boys couldn’t find it in themselves to breathe freely, their legs locked with complicated sentiment.

The moment they say her, they had thought her beautiful.

And at the same time, they thought her impossible.

What grew from her hair in the area above her ears, was a set of two horns.

Watching the girl with golden horns, the three were trapped in beauty

and fear.

Among all demi-humans, they had never heard of a variant that had horns sprout from their heads. Even if they were merely ignorant, and such a race did exist, seeing her for the first time invoked fear.

Of all else, her atmosphere was different.

One of the boys somehow managed to squeeze out his voice.

“W-who are you? An adventurer off to the village? Never seen you before, but…”

When she turned around, her eyes were blue and clear, but at the same time, they looked down on, and despised.

“Eeek!”

The surprised boy fell onto his back, as the wolf’s companions began to gather around the girl. They ignored the boys, drawing near her feet, and taking in the scent of their fallen comrade.

The girl opened her mouth.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t notice you in time… farewell, brave soul.”

Saying that, the girl placed the wolf on the ground. Its comrades howled, and touched their foreheads to her legs. Some of the pups pressed their bodies to her.

She closed her eyes, and when she opened them, the wolf’s corpse burst into flames.

The pale blue flame flickering, she…

“Go on, there is nothing left here.”

After the wolf pack returned to the depths of the forest, she glared at the boys. Walking around the flame, and approaching them, she spoke.

“You see, I have quite a hatred for ones like you. Ignorant, yet prideful… right, to make sure you’ll never repeat something like this, I’ll have one of you disappear. The other two should return to the village nearby, and hand down the tale they saw today. And that will be the end of the matter.”

The girl spoke disinterestedly. The boys exchanged pale glances with sweat streaming down their faces.

The girl.

“So who will disappear?”

Disappear. That’s all she said, but they could understand.

Among them, one was to die.

“W-we’re sorry. We’re sorry, so please let us off.”

One of them said that, so the girl tilted her head.

“And what are you sorry about? If you can say it, then out with it.”

They looked t one another.

“F-for killing a wolf.”

Hearing that, the girl burst into laughter.

“Ahahaha, you’re right about that one. Yep, you’re not wrong about that. But you see…”

In an instant, her form had changed.

From a small woman, to a beast with white scales and golden mane. A quilin.

Her two horns disappeared, to be replaced by a single one in the center.

One for offense, a sharp prong.

“I won’t tell you not to kill lifeforms. Even I kill to survive. To be quite frank here, I wouldn’t even have a complaint if you enjoyed killing it. That’s your personal problem. But…”

With a step forward, she caused all the boys to fall onto their backsides. The one who was on the ground already got on all fours in an attempt to escape.

The first quilin they had ever laid eyes upon was directing malice at them.

With that divine form, she showed hatred.

Understanding that, the boys pleaded for forgiveness with teary eyes.

But the quilin didn’t seem to hold any interest in that.

“I just don’t like you on a personal level. And you’ve pointlessly destroyed the balance of this forest. That is your sin. Now once more, who shall be the one to disappear?”

There was quite an off sense, hearing a young girl’s voice from the large beast’s mouth.

But more than that, the boys valued their own well-beings.

“I told you not to do it! You’re the one who dragged me in!”
“Don’t screw with me! You were the one enjoying it the most!”
“Well I sure don’t want it! I don’t want to die! I don’t want to die at all!”

They cried out and began cursing at one another. The quilin was listening patiently, but…

“Who’s disappearing?”

Their pleas for forgiveness hadn’t reached her.

But the quilin suddenly turner her eyes from the boys to a point to the

side.

"So you're here. I've been waiting…"

What the boys saw was the adventurer with blue hair.

Perhaps he had been in a rush, and twigs and leaves were stuck fast to his hair. He was out of breath, and changing the dagger in his right hand to his left, he drew out a sabre.

Lowering his hips, he took a stance and glared at the quilin.

Unlike them, he had taken a posture to confront her.

After raising its forefeet high in the air, the quilin leapt. When she landed, she was in the form of a human once more.

And looking down at the sobbing boys…

"I don't care anymore. I've found something more important than you. If you ever appear before my eyes again, I'll be sure to make you disappear."

The threatened youths hurried down the forest path from which they had come.

They had thrown aside all the baggage they were carrying, as they frantically raced off.

Chapter 15: Quilin May

I steadied my breathing before turning the dagger in my left hand to my opponent.

What my Skills told me, was that the girl before my eyes was an enemy. In the area map, ther was nothing but a single red dot shining right in front of me.

The surrounding monsters had disappeared, and the yellow village boys were hurriedly leaving the area.

The girl in highly exposing clothing had two characteristic horns atop her head.

And from what I saw in the Fifth's memory, I surmised this was the quilin, May.

"What were you doing?"

When I tried to make an intimidating voice, she touched her short hair without showing much interest. She looked between me and the Jewel around my neck.

"Nothing really? A threat, at most. Despite how energetic they were, the second they met a strong foe, the contracted and huddled themselves into balls. With a bit of threatening, I'm sure they'll quiet down for a little while. And that's our job, you see."

Job.

As she said that word, May shrugged her shoulders, and gave a restrained smile.

"No, I'm being serious here. I didn't have any mind to eat or kill them or anything. Even as I am, I'm on the gentler side of my herd."

While calling herself gentle, she continued to direct hostility at me.

She didn't seem to think anything of having a weapon pointed her way.

She put her right hand to her chest, and kept it there a while.

Her left hand was brought to her hip, and she spoke as if proud of it.

"Yes even like this, I'm an ally of humanity, after all. I mean, I'm quite indebt to them… now then, if you happen to know anything about it, I'd appreciate you answered. Why is it my dear benefactor's presence is emanating from the blue gem you hang from your neck? And at the same time, slight as it may be, you give off a similar air as well."

Lowering both her hands, she glared at me with narrowed eyes.

As not to let any of my movements pass, her expression was serious.

So I started by introducing myself.

"I am Lyle Walt… Fredricks Walt's descendent. And this gem has recorded the Skill of the Fifth Generation Head of the house."

Perhaps unsatisfied with my answer, she widened her legs, bent forward a little, and let a strong voice from her stomach.

All she did was yell, but my body convulsed in response.

"Don't lie! That's no 【Gem】! There's no way a simple gem could let off such an elaborate presence. Right, you… you all must have locked Fredricks in it."

It didn't seem my words were getting through, so I gripped the Jewel.

The Fifth.

『May, I wasn't sealed anywhere. I'm already dead. You should already understand that…』

On the Fifth's strained voice, May responded.

But…

“See, as I thought, it’s Fredricks. He’s grieving. That’s why it’s my turn to save him.”

When she raised her right arm to the side, her clothing receded to reveal her hand. And as it appeared, a quilin horn sprouted from her palm.

“Oy! You just heard his voice, didn’t you!? Then if you can hear him, can’t you–”

“Hmm, so it talks. I’m starting to want it more and more. I mean, it’s been a few decades since we last talked… back then, I didn’t know that humans only lived a lifespan of fifty to sixty years. I was sure I could meet him again… but…”

Her form instantly disappeared from my vision, and I immediately found myself staunched over.

I was sent into the air by her right leg swiping at me from the air, and as I was falling towards the ground, her left leg sent me crashing into it.

I rolled to gain distance, stood at once, and took a stance with the dagger.

Despite my base specs being elevated by Skills, a strong enough blow could still knock me off my feet.

With the horn growing from her right arm, May appeared right in front of me again, and slashed as if to cut me down.

(This one’s fighting style… is a bit like our house’s.)

Sparks flew from my dagger, and I felt an ominous sensation from it, so I leapt backward as she swung her right hand at me horizontally.

“Yep, you don’t call yourself Fredricks’ descendent for nothing. The way you move your body is reminiscent of his.”

Looking at the dagger in my left hand, the part it had received the attack had chipped, with cracks spreading across the blade.

If I had taken that blow, the dagger would have shattered, and I'll bet I'd have been killed.

From within the Jewel, the Third.

『Hey, don't her movements look… a bit like ours?』

To the Fifth, the Fourth.

『Could it be you…』

He was quite upfront about it.

『I taught her. By the way, she knows full well the sorts of Skills I had. And I used the First's, Second's Third's, and Fourth's Skills to at least their primary levels.』

The Sixth let out a sigh.

『You never properly taught *me* anything…』

The Seventh sounded tired, but he did call out for my attention.

『Lyle, it's that… it's a good thing you didn't bring Novem or any of the others along.』

If I had, then past problems would just be brought up again. What's more, May seems to be under some sort of misunderstanding, so it's quite possible some strange topics would have been brought up.

I returned my dagger to its sheath at my waist, and pulled my spare sabre.

With a sabre in both hands, I slowly moved to use the forest terrain as best as I could.

(She has me beat in power output? Though I think I'll be able to overwhelm her for a brief moment if I use the First's Full Burst…)

If I defeated this girl, I'm sure the Fifth would fly into a fit of rage. No, there's no helping it, right? I really don't know how this fight will go.

And I don't even want to fight a divine beast like a quilin.

Even if they didn't contain magic stones, their flesh, blood, horns and scales went for a tremendous fortune, though.

As May rushed in, I tried reading her movements, and parried her horn with a blade.

(Maybe…!)

Both her speed and power were over mine. But May was weaker than Celes.

Based on how I approached it, she was within the scope of enemies I could hold my ground against.

She didn't seem aggravated at having her strike turned aside, merely coming to slash again.

When I parried that one, she suddenly stopped in front of me, leaned forward, and did a handstand on only her left.

She spread her legs out and spun, and taken aback, I instinctively used my arm to block it, and was sent flying backwards.

"Did you find that one interesting? When I did it on Fredricks, he dodged it quite easily… you're weak, aren't you?"

I stood, and felt a numbness in my arm as I took a stance.

"Just a little growing up, and a child's speed and reach shoot straight up!"

When I refuted it, she looked at me.

"… Hm~ so you know what form I took when I was with Fredricks. Did you hear the stories? No, that's not it."

Saying it wasn't it, she jumped at me, and this time she used the trees and branches to maneuver around.

"Now you see~ I'm a quilin, right? Did you not think it possible I was more accustomed to the forest than you?"

I turned, and held my blades in a cross to block and turn aside her thrust.

She had circled around, and aimed right at my heart. It doesn't seem she had any intentiions of going easy on me.

"You react fast. You power's also something up there. Your Skills… nine? Ten? Seriously, what's up with that false gem of yours?"

She jumped back and escaped into the foliage, I confirmed her position with Skills.

She was running circles around, and if I showed an opening, I'm sure she would take it.

From the Jewel.

『Oy, go tell him the weakness of a quilin already.』

The Third was pressing the Fifth.

『… Weakness? There was something like that? Even if she's not up to Celes' level, that's a flippin' quilin, you know? Even like this, I think she's probably holding back over there.』

She's holding back? Why would she do that?

Thinking that, I stuck my right sabre into the ground, and put that hand around the Jewel.

The movements I had been tracing with Skills suddenly became duller.

(So she's after the jewel after all. I don't think anything would come of her getting it.)

But even if I told her, she didn't seem to believe it. That's why it was so troubling.

While I tried thinking up a means to get the message across, the Fourth…

『Lyle, isn't this the place to use your Skill?』

I shook my head.

(Fool! The condition for that one's a deep kiss! You think that's possible!?)

There, the Fifth as well.

『Ah, that one sounds nice. Lyle, you've never tested it, so I think there's some worth in trying it out.』

Why do these guys sound so laid back?

Well sure, in order to take the Jewel, she wouldn't break it. That's likely why she wasn't giving it her all.

But I was the same. I wasn't trying to kill her, and I wanted to solve the misunderstanding as well.

The Seventh.

『You're still reluctant when she's in human form? Then how about you just have her take up quilin form?』

The Fifth agreed.

『That's right! If your opponent's an animal, then it's just something of a greeting!』

Um, please don't just write it off like that.

But I do get the feeling it's the option with the greatest amount of possibility.

"Are you listening? How about we talk a bit?"

May jumped down from a branch, and looked at me.

"If you're going to hand it over, I don't mind letting you go. But I'll be having you answer a few questions first."

I…

"Okay, just listen to what I have to say for a bit. First change into your quilin form, then kiss me… no wait! I don't have the slightest bit of impure motives here! This is a necessity! It's just a momentary contact of mucous membranes! It'll be over if the tongue slips in for just a bit!"

… The look she sent me turned unbelievably cold.

Eyes even colder than what she sent to those three boys were falling on me.

"… I never thought Fredricks' descendent would wind up so… awful. It really is irritating."

From the Jewel, the Fourth.

『Idiot! Why are you angering her!?』

Even if you tell me that, I can't really imagine the sort of happenings that lead up to a kiss. We were in the middle of battle, and I was panicked, so failing to explain the crucial portions was my mistake, though.

"No! Listen here, this is my Skill. If we kiss, then a line will be formed, and–"

"Yes, and? Why is it I have to follow your orders? If you're trying to win through trickery, I'd prefer you think up a better excuse."

(It's not an excuse! It's not, but even I'm beginning to doubt it at this point.)

To make a line between bodies, and allow for ideas to be transferred: Connection.

Isn't the initial condition too cruel?

The Seventh.

『Lyle, even I can't follow up whatever you just spewed. You're the worst. But if you want to look at it from a best Lyle perspective, I have to say, it's not bad at all.』

The third as well.

『Pick a time and place, why don't you. Good grief… so we're all good on having him kiss her in quilin form, right? Now then, it's restarting. See, she's coming!』

The aloof Third raised his voice, so I unhanded the Jewel, took the grounded sabre in hand, and cut at her incoming fist.

"It's not a horn?"

The fist was wrapped in cloth, and my sabre's edge didn't slice through. I had a hunch those weren't normal clothes, but as I thought, they had some sort of special power.

"Oh so you'd prefer being impaled on my horn? In that case…"

She moved to hit her right elbow into my flank, and I tried to jump back to avoid it, but the Fifth screamed out.

『Jump further!』

With those words, not just by a little, I jumped with all my might, to find my clothing torn.

At May's elbow, the cloth had been penetrated to reveal a large horn.

When it retracted, her clothing wasn't damaged.

I understood it was a wondrous material, but I was more relieved that my flank hadn't been cut through.

"I guess it's no time to hold back."

When I said that, her eyebrows twitched in response?

"Can you please not joke around? I'm the one holding back over here. If I just wanted you to disappear, it would be over in an instant. You understand that, right?"

I stuck both my sabres into the ground, took the Jewel in my right hand, and plucked it off my neck as if to tear the chain. The chain wrapped around my arm, the silver ornaments expanded, and the giant sword took shape.

Seeing that, May…

"As I thought, that's no normal gem. You humans have gone and made more bizarre contraptions… but…!"

She leapt right at me.

But this time I matched her, and clashed.

The sword let of sparks as it collided with the horn protruding from her left hand. This time without chipping, the edge remained intact.

When I started attacking on my own, May jumped back as she eluded my swings.

A Skill to temporarily increase one's abilities several times over.

I used 【Full Burst】 to push her back.

Our standings had changed from before, and I made sure not to let her gain any ground. If she jumped back, I followed, if she tread in, I retreated.

We both swung our weapons of choice as we maintained such a distance. And again the blades met and competed.

“As I thought, you’re similar. You learned from the Fifth, did you? Well so did I!”

Just as she knew my movements, I also knew hers.

Our relation was like pupils under the same master, and after I grasped the characteristics of her weapons, I could fight her normally.

Even if she had the power and the speed, she was just like me in that she didn’t match up to my predecessors. This was probably the limits of her human form.

Impatiently, she let off a pale blue ling of light from her body.

Emitting electricity, she forcefully opened some space between us.

I jumped back.

And before me stood her quilin form.

She kicked the ground, and glared.

“… Now see here, I don’t want to dawdle here too long. I’ll let this end for now. All I need is to get my hands on that Jewel, and I have plenty of time left to spare. Now… don’t disappear on me.”

She raced off through the narrow forest ways, and I put away the large sword to give chase.

She was running in zigzags, but regardless of the size of her build, she could run freely between the trees. All I could say was that she was a veteran of the field. She ran without any collisions, at quite a rate.

Clenching the Jewel as I ran…

“Fifth!”

I called him, found a large tree, and put my back to it.

When I pointed the Jewel in my right hands at May, the Fifth…

『May… wait!』

Those words shouldn't have reached her, but her body twitched, and she came to a sudden stop. Her hooves gouged out the ground, and stopping a few meters ahead, she tilted her head.

"… Hey, so you *could* do it all along."

The Fifth spoke.

『And what were you planning if she didn't stop!? In the first place, you should've met up and discussed this sort of thing beforehand with me, or something like that! Use your head!』

Like a dog restraining itself from a treat before its eyes, May was watching me with heavy breath. But at the same time, she had regained some composure.

"Haha, so you still remember the time you spent together so faithfully. How many decades ago was that."

And May…

"… To me, they were happy memories. Won't you refrain from mocking them? But I see. Fredricks wants to protect you, does he? Then I…"

(So she felt the Fifth's sentiment to protect me?)

When May walked closer, I pressed my clenched fist to her face.

To be more precise, I put the Jewel to her. When I showed her the Jewel in the palm of my hand, she narrowed her eyes.

The Fifth.

『May, don't attack Lyle anymore. He's my descendant. So you don't have to… anymore…』

"Sorry Fredricks. I think I can tell what you're saying, but your voice won't reach me. I'm sorry. I only wanted to hear you again. I wanted you to pat my head again. So… I'm sorry."

She retracted her horn and put her forehead to the Jewel, so I…

"… Continuing on from before. I have a certain Skill. 【Connection】 … it's a Skill that transmits thoughts. The conditions for that are a kiss. If you use me as a medium, you may be able to talk with the Fifth."

May nodded, and turned her mouth towards me.

Kissing an animal… I thought only a dog would ever lick your mouth. I had a bit of hesitation, but I kissed her.

(Never thought my third kiss would be to an animal… right, come to think of it, Monica took that one. My first kiss, huh?)

That's what I ended up thinking.

Chapter 16: Trade

It was a strange sensation.

Quilin May was in front of me, and I looked over my surroundings.

At the same time, May herself seemed mildly perplexed.

After taking a jump in her quilin form, she let the cloth hanging down her arms sway as she touched down.

She was in her human form, using her left hand to hold her head.

“Ah~ an interesting Skill you’ve got there. I thought I saw ten, but it’s a completely different one, perhaps?”

The information I obtained from my Skills was probably being transmitted to her as well.

I understood this is what it meant to be linked.

The information I held… the informational map, and the enemy dissertations were being shared with her.

Similarly enough, whatever she saw through her eyes was being sent to me.

“… My head is starting to hurt. The information to process has jumped up all at once.”

I held my head, and saw myself holding it from her point of view. Yet there she was, occupying the same space in my field of vision. It was quite an outrageous sensation.

From the Jewel, the Seventh offered some advice.

『Lyle, limit the information flow. Think you can do that? Vision… you don’t have to share the five senses. For now, you don’t have to give her

your Skill effects either.』

May opened her eyes wide.

“Well color me surprised. You really can talk.”

It does appear she heard it that time. I intuitively manipulated my own Skill, and somehow manage to control the flood of sensory information.

And after I made it so I didn’t have to see through her eyes simultaneously, I shook my head.

The Fifth called over to her.

『Right. Like this, we’re all able to talk with Lyle. That voice usually doesn’t reach any other, but… it seems you caught onto it.』

On his kind voice, May brought both her hands to her chest, and began to shed tears.

“Fredricks… sorry, I… couldn’t keep my promise.”

Having a girl crying before my eyes put quite a damper on my mood.

In his gentle tone, the Fifth.

『It’s fine. I also lied to you. Because I thought we’d never meet again.』

May wiped her tears with a finger, and replied with a smile.

“But like this, we’re able to talk once more. And that’s something to be happy about, Fredricks.”

But the Fifth…

『… Sorry, May. I’ve already died. What’s left in this Jewel is my… Fredricks Walt’s Skill, along with his memories and heart. I’m something of an imitation produced from a record.』

Sorrowfully, May fidgeted around.

That must be just how identical the Fifth of the Jewel's presence was to the real deal. Enough for her to think I had sealed him in.

『It's my responsibility the promise went unfulfilled. You don't have to worry about it anymore.』

"But… but still!"

May reached out her hand, and touched the Jewel hanging at my neck. And the scenery suddenly underwent a change.

(This sensation… I'm being drawn in?)

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It was the stable that often came out in the Fifth's memory.

Around were the various animals he had been raising, and in the center stood me and May.

"Miquel, Angelo, and Maia… why? I mean, everyone should be dead already."

Surprised, may tried to touch the horses and other animals she called out to. But without accomplishing its purpose, her hands passed through them.

She looked towards the room she had once lived.

And from it, a girl in a white one piece dress ran out, and started talking to the animals.

The creatures cried out in response, and walked up to her.

A large dog approached small May, and she seemed delighted as it licked her face.

"… Zeroute."

Calling out its name, May looked down with a sad expression. There, I heard footsteps approaching.

I turned to find the Fifth at the stable's entrance.

『… I never thought something like this would be possible.』

I sought some confirmation.

"Is this your room of memory? But why is May here?"

He held his head, and shook it.

『Like I know. I can only think she went through your Skill to connect with us as well. But it's been quite a while since we've met like this, May.』

Bursting into tears, May jumped at the Fifth. She had changed to her quilin form.

"Fredricks! I've gotten bigger. I've become a full-fledged adult, and I can even make my own herd!"

The Fifth embraced the large quilin's neck, and patted her.

『You've sure grown. I see, so you're an adult now… I'm happy for you. I couldn't help but wonder about it. But now I can be sure. So I never met you to the end, did I. Well, I'm glad you grew up so healthy.』

As she tilted her head, the Fifth explained.

『… Our memories only go up to the last moment we held the blue gem. There's nothing after that. So I don't know how it all ended.』

May pointed her forehead at him, ad he started patting it.

Her actions seemed to indicate she didn't mind either way.

『Hey, May? Can you listen to my request?』

"Request?"

May peered into his face.

『… Will you lend Lyle a hand?』

The Fifth left me in her care.

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Inside the forest.

After I regained consciousness, I headed off back to the village.

May had blown away the gathered monsters with her lightning, so there was barely any work left to do.

I confirmed the surrounding situation with Skills, and looked around the area from which the three boys had run off before pressing onwards.

"Here it is. Really, even if they wanted to toss it aside, did they really have to scatter it like that? It's quite a pain to collect it."

I picked up the last silver coin, and put in the sack. There were fifty in total.

That's either the last of it, or the boys themselves still have whatever remains.

Letting out a sigh, I turned and looked at May.

She was in human form.

And in her outfit clearly unsuited for entering a forest, she stood prim and proper.

The twigs and grass never stained or caught onto that cloth. Despite all the mud on the ground, her sandal-like footwear didn't pose the slightest problem.

In this dark forest she kept a calm expression, following behind me.

"Do you really plan on following me?"

May looked at me perplexed.

"Of course. It's Fredricks' request after all. I was always being saved by him, without an opportunity to repay the favor. Well, my goal's mainly to defeat monsters anyways. There's no problem with working alongside humans for that one."

I went over the coins again, sealed the bag, and turned to her.

"Um, coming with me pretty much means you'll be becoming an adventurer you know?"

She responded with tired eyes.

"It really doesn't mattered. Among my comrades, there are others out adventuring as well. It's not like I'm the only curious one out there."

When I found myself shocked at that surprising reality, she smiled.

"Ah, but you won't be able to tell them apart. Look."

She touched the horns growing diagonally back from her ears, and they shrunk until they could no longer be seen.

"Like that, our appearance is the same. There's a few humans out there that can see through it with Skills, but… if they try to do something, I'll go on the counteroffensive."

Still surprised, I…

“So you can be discerned with Skills.”

“Hey it passes a surprisingly large amount of times. In all truth, even if they can see, quite a lot of humans pretend they can’t. Though there are idiots here and there.”

And what happens to such idiots is something I could understand without asking.

(And if she’s found out, would she have to run?)

No one of a low skill level would be able to capture a sacred beast. And if one does have the ability to do some, then that means even without doing so, they had enough competence to put food on the table.

May hung her head a little.

“And if Fredricks was speaking the truth, then we can’t remain irrelevant. In your sense of time’s passage, about three hundred years ago. Back then, there was an event that caused a large decay in our population. For a single person’s sake.”

Agrissa…

My grandmother’s lineage brought back to its roots, came from the devious vixen Agrissa.

With that blood in her veins, Celes was trying to move a country.

“Did it go down that much?”

May asserted she wasn’t too knowledgeable, before telling me.

“Some of our race made light of her. They were captured. Splendidly stuffed and mounted. The horns and scales made into human tools, and the meat eaten up. Even when they aren’t troubled on food, humans tend to do that one quite a bit.”

It was a sentiment she couldn't understand.

"Is that why you'll lend me a hand?"

My put her hand to her chin, and made an earnest expression as she analyzed me from head to toe.

"Since Fredricks isn't here anymore, I might as well ask his descendent. Hey, want to make a child with me? If possible two? I really want five, mind you."

I did a spit take, and from the Jewel, the Fifth.

『Maaaaayy!! You've got to treasure yourself more!! Don't just throw it out like that!』

He was crying out, but the Sixth grumbled in response.

『So you treat your animals like that, yet with us, it was all, go make one already, and done it yet? … I really can't accept it.』

I tilted my head.

"Do you know what you're saying? Go ask a male of your own species."

She scoffed and…

"I'd like to ask if *you* know what *you're* saying. For the species you all refer to as sacred beasts, there's no such thing as a male. And I know about baby making, at least. Isn't that why this human form exists? Ah, but… if you say that you'd prefer quilin form, even I'd be a little troubled here. Those sort of special hobbies are something I haven't heard of until now."

Seeing her scratch her reddened face, I yelled.

"Idiot! Who the hell said something like that!?"

“Then it’s all good. No~ even with the longevity and all, it’s no good if our numbers decrease. And it seems the monsters are increasing as of late, so the balance is going to crumble at this rate. Okay, we’re doing this.”

I shook my head quite violently.

“Why? You have a mate? Come to think of it, there were lots of girls around, but… Ah, could you be the harem sort? But that’s strange. I heard humans didn’t make harems that often. Ah! I’ve got it!”

She seemed to find a satisfying answer within herself.

“Fredricks had a Harem, so you’re a subspecies that makes harems. Yep, yep, I know for sure there are human males that do it, so there’s no mistaking it!”

“That’s full of mistakes! You really plan on living in human society with that level of understanding!?”

I wanted to clear up her misconceptions…

“But the surrounding female held affection for you, right? I really don’t understand you humans. But I’ll follow you because I want your seed. I’ll give you power, and you’ll spread your seed in me. Alright, that sounds good.”

“No it doesn’t! It’s too far out that I don’t know where to start… anyways, that sort of thing is supposed to happen between two people who love one another!”

There, voices came from the Jewel.

Third and up.

『What to do. I can’t say I agree with the boy’s sense of values.』
『And wait, if that’s all it takes to earn a quilin’s help, then why not go for it?』
『My cute little May is… wait, isn’t Lyle’s sense of values a bit strange?』
『Seventh… are you sure you didn’t educate him wrong?』

『Well, me and Zenoire were the perfect couple. There's no helping if Lyle was jealous of that.』

I found the Seventh's casual bragging to be irritating, and I've heard grandma complain about him before.

You've got to be careful not to end up like him, Lyle, she would say in a kind tone.

(I'm not a noble anymore, so I have nothing to do with political marriage! And just making children is… who's going to explain this to my comrades!?)

I continued listening to her outrageous demands as I continued to the village.

"Okay listen here, definitely don't bring up child making. I'm serious here! Especially not around Novem."

May thought back.

"Novem? Ah, the one with her hair tied up, right? That child was quite a strange one. Your harem is filled with novelties, and that child's especially so. I wonder what it is… I get the feeling I've met her somewhere before."

What's she talking about? That on my mind, I saw my comrades… Novem and the others at the entrance of the forest, entering in order to search for me, so I called out to them.

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After returning from the forest, I went to the chief's house to give my report.

With sweat pouring down his face, he let out a deep sigh.

“Meaning a quilin isn’t coming to destroy out village?”

“Yes, I talked her out of it. She also said that as long as the forest’s balance wasn’t damaged any further, she’d stop at a threat.”

I couldn’t really go as far as to say that May was that specific quilin.

The three boys were currently locked in the village’s storehouse.

It seems that after returning, they had explained how they had angered a quilin, sending the village into chaos.

And naturally as it was, the village chief was blamed.

I had returned while he was thinking of a countermeasure, so that’s why I’m here.

“That’s a huge help. But how can we get the villagers to understand that… among them, there are some idiots petitioning to kill the three of them and offer them to the forest for forgiveness.”

Doing something like that held absolutely no meaning. Even if he explained that, the chief didn’t currently have the means to stop the panicking villagers.

I turned my eyes to the village’s money on the table.

And from the Jewel came the Third’s voice.

『Ah, I just thought up something nice.』

It definitely won’t be nice, I thought, as I touched the Jewel to ask for his explanation.

『It’s the best response for both you and the chief. You’ll need May’s assistance, but first do some trading with the chief.』

Perhaps thinking it interesting, the Sixth endorsed the idea.

『That does sound nice. Make your reward the report to the guild about your examination.』

The Fourth too.

『In exchange for not taking the reward money for the request. I was also thinking about it, but… if the situation really is this bad, I'm sure the chief will lend some power. What's more, he'll even owe us!』

The Fifth.

『I don't want to involve May in your backroom dealings, but… there's no helping it.』

The Seventh.

『There's merit for all parties. Lyle… you're doing a good deed. The chief will be accepted by the village, and you'll be evaluated labyrinth-ready. Happiness for both sides.』

Just what exactly is going through their minds when they see the chief before my eyes desperately grasping for a solution…

But I couldn't think of anything better to overcome the situation anyways.

"Chief, a little bit of your time."

"What?"

And thus began the trade with the chief.

Chapter 17: Former Harlot

Near the entrance to the forest I stood, looking over the chief and the other villagers.

“Oy, it’ll really be fine, right?”

“Yep, all good. She’s the sort that listens.”

I’m not sure how many times this made it, but I calmed the chief down once more as we looked towards the tree.

And from it, May in her quilin form leisurely showed herself.

On the appearance of her shining white scales against the dark forest backing, the villagers displayed an array of reactions.

Those wary.

Those in reverence.

And atop that, those silently watching over the scene.

After the quilin came all the way to our side, I brought the chief along for feigned negotiations as previously arranged.

“She really came out.”

“That’s what I told you, didn’t I? Ah, make sure you keep up a serious expression, alright.”

“Whoops, that’s right.”

And after I talked with the chief, we conversed with May a bit. After a while, she turned, and disappeared into the woods.

Behind us, the villagers watching over to see the result started getting loud.

The chief turned, raised a hand, and gave it a grand wave.

And seeing that, some villagers sat down on the spot from relief. A few among them raised cries of joy.

He return to their midst to be surrounded by the importants of the village.

“Yeah~ I knew you could do it.”
“That’s a heavy load off our shoulders.”
“I’ll treat you to some of my special liquor tonight.”

As if they had swapped out their entire hand, they were surrounding the man with smiles.

I looked upon the scene, the ancestors of the Jewel offering some explanations.

In regards to this settlement’s scope, the Third was the most knowledgeable in the field.

『What a splendid change of heart. But insincere as it may be, the way the chief’ll be seen in this village will change for the better. Well, they’ll always be tough on the newcomers. If you don’t contribute enough, you won’t be recognized, and if try too hard, you’ll just be used. It really is a hard, being chief.』

Surrounded by those men, the chief gave a sarcastic smile.

I separated from him and the villagers to meet up with Novem.

“Lyle-sama, we have finished the arrangements to depart, but is that really alright? We weren’t all the way through our Gray Wolf subjugation, were we?”

Novem sounded worried about the request itself, so I nodded. It didn’t seem that anyone cared about our party at this point.

“It’s fine. May cleaned up a majority of it already. As long as we

confirm the completion of the task, it'll be gone and done with."

After looking in the direction of the forest, she let her eyes fall on me.

"I wasn't able to contribute much to the end. I'm glad your negotiations with the chief proceeded favorably. We've successfully cleared the exam have we, Lyle-sama?"

Successfully is a bit of a mistake.

What I wanted was an evaluation high enough to challenge a labyrinth. And I needed to get that on terms that didn't make it seem the utility value was too high.

"We've gotten a convenient evaluation, but for that, I gave up the additional request's reward as well. Well, I doubt we'll be able to tell what'll happen until we return."

The guild will have to evaluate us themselves.

I can only pray it'll go on in a way convenient to us.

"We shouldn't hope for too much… it's just… we'll have to periodically complete requests like this, won't we."

If looked upon objectively as a party, ours was too small in scope with few achievements to report. It's true that we have a high record to compensate, but I'm not sure what the guild has to say about that one.

There's also a possibility the difficulty of the requests allotted to us will just increase.

(Well, it'll work out one way or another. Even if it doesn't, doing something about that is my job as a leader.)

With May added on, our party numbered nine.

IT's still a small number, but we could now split in two and act separately.

Even if it just put someone on the bench, having more members was something to be thankful for.

“Even so, I never thought a quilin would become our ally. Lyle-sama, may I ask what reason she gave for wanting to join our numbers?”

On her eyes that seemed to peer up through me, I instantly wiped the area around my mouth.

I remembered my kiss with May. And putting my tongue in while she was in quilin form… thinking back, perhaps it would have been best if she changed back to human form if not for that moment alone.

(No, that’d make me hesitate in itself.)

I averted my eyes, and gave a vague answer.

“Well, it’s that… she’s an acquaintance or something with one of my ancestors? No you see~ it’s that fate sort of thing. I’m sure it exists.”

I smiled and tried to play it off. Her eyes opened wide for a moment, before swiftly returning to normal.

“Novem?”

“… No, this must be proof your predecessors are rewarding you for the work you put in every day, Lyle-sama. Let’s keep up with that pace.”

Our end goal was to take down Celes.

Turning to see the village folk rejoice, and the chief grin bitterly, I spoke to her.

“That’s right. But the path sure is a long one.”

Novem nodded.

“Right.”

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Night.

When I headed over to the chief's house, I found him lying on the sofa with a reddened face. He had returned from the banquet in town.

In the morning he met the quilin, and during the day, he had gone into the forest with the other important people of the village to confirm the completion of the request. At his return, the villagers had prepared a feast, and they drank for as long as the sun was up, is how it went down.

Eva spread her songs at that banquet, while Monica and Shannon aided with the preparations and cleanup.

The chief's wife approached me, and handed over an envelope.

"This is for you."

"Thanks. Is this the documents pertaining to this request?"

She nodded and turned to the chief.

I don't think he was weak to drink, but with the amount he consumed, he was exposing quite an incapacitated state.

"After returning, he hurriedly finished these up. Because seeing the scale of the banquet preparations, he wouldn't have time during the night or next morning, he said. He's quite a hard worker, you know."

His smiling wife draped the cover he had kicked off over him again. She seemed happy. Truly happy.

Accepting the envelope, I was a little unpleased I couldn't talk with the chief. I was a bit curious whether he reported according to the contents of our negotiations, but it was the sort of envelope the guild could tell if I'd opened.

Seeing my worry, his wife spoke.

“Don’t worry so much. My husband isn’t one to lie in this sort of thing.”

She giggled, so I scratched my head.

“So he’ll lie in regards to other things?”

“Of course. I don’t recall if it was back when he was an adventurer or when he became chief though. But he lied his share. Like in this time’s case.”

It does seem she knew what we were doing this time around. Was there anything else she caught on to? I began to wonder.

“It’s alright. I’m sure I was the only one to notice.”

Of good appearance, she had a good head on her shoulders to top it off.

Looking at the man sloppily sleeping on the side, I…

“I’m surprised the chief managed to marry someone as pretty and smart as yourself.”

She gave a strained smile.

“I knew you were young for an adventurer, but it seems you aren’t knowledgeable on that sort of thing.”

Wondering what sort of thing she meant, I tilted my head.

After turning left and right, and confirming her children were asleep, she beckoned me to sit down.

She prepared some tea, and sat across.

“Lyle-san, was it?”

“Yes.”

I sipped tea after giving that reply, and she went on.

“I was once a harlot.”

I managed to will myself to swallow down the liquid about to burst from my mouth, breaking into a coughing fit as I looked at her. Still so young, pretty, of orderly appearance and favorable temperament.

“That’s… um…”

I hesitated to give a response, so she nodded with a smile.

“Yes, my husband was but one of my customers. Let’s see… perhaps it was ten years ago. Having become an adventurer, and having become able to earn, my husband decided to buy me off.”

I had no idea what sort of expression to make, but some advice started flowing in from the Jewel.

It was the Sixth.

『Lyle, you don’t have to do anything. Don’t try to sympathize or anything, just earnestly listen to what she has to say.』

So I listened to her story.

“All of your party members are women, aren’t they? I won’t dig too deeply into it, but that sort of party is quite rare. A large portion of them go for ones out of the trade. And for Beim’s adventurers, many choose the harlots as their partners.”

I knew there were many a adventurer who didn’t look at coworkers as members of the opposite sex, but I never thought courtesans would be the first they’d turn to.

(I thought it would be the receptionists or normal residents for sure.)

“Well, Beim’s ‘entertainment’ district is quite prosperous, so it’s in no shortage of daughters sold off cheaply by parents of some far off land. I was the same. On year with little harvest, the monsters attacked, and they needed money no matter what.”

With apologetic sentiment on my mind, I ended up asking…

“Um, what did you mean about becoming able to earn…”

She shook her head, and gazed at me in all seriousness.

“A majority of adventurers will lose their lives. Among my acquaintances, there are a large number who’ve passed. It’s not that they were weak, I heard it truly was a lack of luck. To be able to safely earn money, you have to overcome that path. But it wasn’t all bad things to be found. Education was a necessity, they said, so etiquette, reading, writing and calculations were hammered into my head over my first two years.”

From the Jewel, the sixth let out his voice.

『Hm, she was bought off by quite a decent shop there.』

For some reason, I get the feeling he’s a little too knowledgeable in the field. I didn’t want to pry into it now, simply inclining my ear to the young woman’s words.

“Even if you try to stay quiet, Beim is a place people will gather. Once your age hits a certain point, then work in the business becomes quite unrelenting. Because of that, it happens that regular customers may buy off the girl of their choosing. Of course, if you really hate it, you’re able to refuse.”

And since she didn’t that means she took a liking to the chief, is it?

“He’s a kind person. I think I was lucky.”

After looking at the chief, she returned her gaze to me, and smiled.

“That was quite a long preface. What I really want to say is in regards to your party, Lyle-san.”

“Mine?”

I tilted my head, and she gave a wry smile.

“How should I put this… both men and women can’t live on nothing but pretty words. Lyle-san, your face is decent, and you seem to make good money. You’re definitely going to suffer for that, so let me give you some advice. You’ve helped my husband quite a bit, so you may think it a reward of sorts.”

I do think I’m going through some troubles at present.

No, rather than that… there are times I simply don’t know what to do. My post-growth high tensions causing me to run my mouth about protecting them, and asking them to follow my lead… yeah, that’s my fault.

But it’s not like my ground state is skilled at womanizing.

I straightened my posture, and she instructed me.

“Are you listening? Please think that the smallest things you do will be watched. Buy a girl a present, and it’s best you assume everyone will know about it next you check. Your party members are, no matter how you look at it, quite conscious of you. You’re being watched quite a bit, you know.”

I gulped down some spit. I feared the thought of being watched.

“I’ll be quite blunt here, but do you have ‘relations’ with all of them?”

I gave an immediate response.

“None. But I’ve kissed… three.”

(First was Monica, then Novem… wait, there was another Monica after that, and finally while in quilin form, I still kissed May so that makes three. Right?)

She looked at me and shook her head.

“Are you looking to be stabbed?”

“Stabbed!? No, but that much is…”

When I thought about that, Aria and Miranda’s faces surfaced in my mind.

“If you make a move once, then it’ll be troublesome if you don’t deal with the other members. It’s fine if it just causes them to leave the party, but if they hold a grudge, it’s possible for your comrades to seriously go at one another’s throats after all.”

I’ve heard about it before. I thought, as I began worrying over how to counteract the calamity to come down on my body.

(Huh? But they’re members who chose to come along even after I announced my Celes-overthrowing goal, so won’t it work out?)

Is what I thought, but I recalled the tense relations of Novem and Miranda.

“If it’s impossible to make it clear, then I recommend you think of a way to deal with the problem of the problem before something explodes.”

“D-deal with…!? No, that sort of thing is…”

My face reddened, causing her to laugh to herself.

“You sure are an earnest one. But It really will be dangerous if you don’t take some countermeasures. I’ve seen love turn to hatred plenty a time. Lyle-san, you should make sure it doesn’t come down to that.”

In an expression as serious I could make, I nodded time and again.

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The morning of the next day.

We had completed the request, so we left the village.

Since the Gray Wolf and quilin problem had been handled, all that was left was what to do to the three boys.

Before we departed, the chief had, with a pained expression from his hangover, explained the likely situation.

(So forced servitude for two years followed up by exile… I've heard of slavery, but come to think of it, I'm not too knowledgeable.)

I knew it existed in itself, but I myself didn't know too much. The Bahnseim Kingdom didn't have such a system, so I didn't know how it worked in depth.

So as not to let them follow us out, the village was watching over the boys quite carefully.

I opened the door of Porter's loading tray, sat down with my legs out the entrance, and stared blankly into space.

The reason being that Porter's insides were quite lively.

I wanted to flee to the roof, but the ones currently on watch up there were Novem and Miranda, having lost out in a game.

I didn't want to approach.

Our new recruit May was fighting with Monica.

"Cheapskate! Let me eat more!"

"Quiet down, you beast! That is the chicken dickwad's lunch you're eying!"

But in regards to the maid, May didn't back down at all.

“Isn’t it unfair to have only one person receive special treatment?”

Monica scoffed. But with a basket in one hand, and the other hand pushing back May’s head, the action wasn’t much of a definite one.

“Hah! Just make do with his leftover scraps. You don’t hear anyone else complaining.”

Well of course not.

I mean, even if they were different, their contents were pretty much the same.

But the one who didn’t stay silent was Shannon.

“Hey wait a minute! If you eat those, then Lyle’s dessert won’t circle around to me!”

Hearing that, Monica…

“Damn you little girl! So you were also a vulture after the Chicken Dickwad’s lunch!? I won’t forgive it! This is the meal I’ve specially balanced and optimized to the superb ratio for that goddamn chicken! ”

May.

“Yeah, that’s fine and all, so hand it over. It’s all the same after it’s eaten!”

Monica yelled out.

“It ain’t lunch yet! Just how much do you guys plan on eating!?”

Eva was recording various things on her memo pad. Perhaps some lyrics had come to mind, as she was writing quite seriously.

Clara had to deal with Porter’s maneuvering, so she was stuck in the prickly air up top.

And within that, Aria sat to my side.

“It’s getting quite noisy. How about you do something about it, leader?”

With those words from her, I looked at the three rampaging around Porter’s insides.

(Porter, you sure were made durable.)

Was my impression of it all.

And wait, I really don’t want to be involved in that.

If I put my mouth in, I’m quite certain it will only fan the flames.

What the Fifth had said… leave it be. But the chief’s wife told me to pay mind to it. I’m losing track of what I should do.

“I think they’re just moderately blowing off some steam over there.”

With my meal in her right hand, Monica equipped a drill on her left to threaten May and Shannon.

They were both cooperating to try and nab my lunch.

“Moderate? That is? I… see…”

We had gotten a new member, but May had already fit herself in.

Everyone already knew of how she was a quilin. And May’s reason for joining was just left at a debt to be repaid to my ancestors.

I made sure she didn’t say anything about wanting my seed.

“What?”

Aria looked like she wanted to say something, so I tried asking.

“Well take it as you will, but you sure do go about making some

strange ones into your comrades. In a sense, we've got quite an amazing lineup here."

Definitely, the quilin May and Automaton Monica were a novelty.

And the rest of them, compared to the average adventurer, had more than an idiosyncrasy or two.

"I'm the one trying to figure out how it came to this."

That was my true and honest sentiment.

Chapter 18: Beim's Guild

We had returned to Beim.

To give the report to the Guild, today I had ventured out with Clara.

In the guild's lobby with intense traffic back and forth, I found Tanya-san at the desk of the line I had gotten in.

"Oh my, back so soon? Or could it be you found it an impossible request?"

Perhaps already aware we had completed it, she joked around as she motioned us to sit.

I handed over the necessary documents. She inspected the envelope before delicately unsealing it and checking the papers within.

She read through them before our eyes, and with the papers in her left hand, she put her right to her chin and nodded a few times.

"Your Evaluation is a 『B』. But it's written here You were quite thorough with your work. Let me hand over the designated reward as promised."

I presented my guild card. She took it and finished up the paperwork.

Nimbly filling out the forms, she confirmed some things with me without stopping her hands.

"From the contents of this report, your transportation time clocks at about five to six days one way. That's quite fast, you know. Did you use horses? Adventurers registered with the guild can borrow them quite cheaply if they fill out the necessary forms. Did you know that?"

She looked at me. Judging by her smile, it seems she had looked up some things beforehand.

It was a service that hadn't be present in anywhere besides Beim, but I…

"I'll make sure to use them next time."

When I said that, Tanya-san let out a light sigh, and returned her eyes to the papers. The top of her desk surely existed, but it was too loaded for me to confirm that fact.

The sound of something like a seal being stamped rung out.

After handing back my card with the paperwork, she left her seat. Likely to bring back my reward for the request.

Clara…

"Was that alright? Could that question not have affected the examination?"

I shrugged.

"It's fine. We were able to finish our job within the allotted timeframe. And our evaluation wasn't bad. If we're too competent, that'll be abused, and we don't currently have the ability to refute such an abuse. If we stretch too far and get too high an evaluation, it'll get hard to move around."

Hearing my opinion, Clara looked relieved. But being relied on by the guild was also a sort of honor.

Your customer service gets put on a higher priority, it seems, and more than all else, your popularity rises. But I don't want to be burnt to ash by the guild.

Especially in Beim, where a huge amount of requests flood in. There were enough to make processing them impossible, so a party as usable as ours may be something in high enough demand to warrant begging.

Movements speed, and ability to deal with problems.

Each of our members was competent, and able to accomplish an extent of tasks on their own. That's why I thought we should restrict our evaluations a bit.

"I was an adventurer of Arumsaas for a considerable amount of time, but as I thought, Beim is different. The atmosphere aside, the quality of their receptionists is different."

I agreed with her as I nodded at the horrid treatment from Arumsaas' guild. And we smiled a little as we waited.

Tanya brought over a metal tray with the reward on it, and placed it on the counter.

"Well then, please confirm the amount. And I think you understand the matters of the east branch, but from here on, you'll have to periodically carry out requests. When you have free time, we mind not if you go challenge a labyrinth or deal with some of the monsters around the city. But please uphold the proper manners in both fields."

I checked over the monetary sum, and accepted it before confirming something with Tanya-san.

"It'll be troublesome if we're left with no freedom at all. About how often would we have to complete a request?"

Taking out a faint metallic board with characters carved onto it, Tanya-san began giving us an explanation.

"It depends on the contents and difficulty of the requests themselves, but if it's something like this time's, then at least once per month. Easier ones may warrant two to three within a single month."

If it was something as simple as a two day trip for minor monster slaying, it may take two to three times a month, it seems.

From within the Jewel, I heard a voice. It was the Fourth.

『They don't have knights, so they have to have the adventurers do all the monsters slaying. Meaning they have soldiers that maintain themselves

and earn money of their own accord… Gimme.』

No need for maintenance cost, what's more, as long as you put out an adequate reward when there was work to be done, they'd go off and do it. I could see what the Fourth saw in it.

The Seventh refuted that point.

『I don't need such soldiers. Using groups you can't ensure the competency of… there's enough of that risk in using mercenaries in war. Not that I'd ever use that lot again.』

The Seventh's adventurer hatred was considerable.

"What is the penalty if we fail to do so?"

Clara asked, and Tanya-san smiled.

"There isn't one. It's fine if you think we won't do a thing on our side of the table."

I looked at her smile, and thought.

(So if they won't do anything at all, they won't do anything special either. They won't offer any special labyrinth subjugation services, I guess.)

Rather than forcing adventurers to work, the guild likely prioritized finding powerful adventurers that worked.

They had not the time to spend on an unmotivated lot. In the end, the guild was an organization that had control over the rights to Magic Stones.

I won't say managing adventurers was just an extra, but perhaps it wasn't their main interest.

It was necessary to organize the adventurers that did the collection of the magic stones, but from their point of view, providing favorable customer service to us was just a freebee.

“And by completing requests, you can be exempt from some taxes. If you haven’t heard, doing them counts as sufficient service to the city.”

If you complete requests, the city of Beim will profit.

The selling of magic stones wasn’t taxed either. That was Beim’s policy.

Clara sounded tired.

“Whatever the case, most of the money adventurers make will be put to the City’s use eventually. In this city without a feudal lord, I’m sure that’s the important point.”

Tanya-san smiled.

“Wow, you’re sharp. But I don’t recommend you say it too often. You never know when a 【Sweeper】 is listening in.”

The wholesome cleaning company that’s existence was fully admitted by the guild, but never came out on the surface. That was the Sweepers. Dealing with adventurers that had more power than the common man, they had to be skilled lest the occupation be in vain.

In Clara’s place, I…

“We’ll watch ourselves. Of course, I doubt they’d be quick tempered enough to set their aim for something as trifling as that.”

Tanya-san spoke.

“Oh I wonder. Now then, congratulations for completing your first job in Beim. We’ll be placing our expectations on you from here on, Lyle-kun. And Clara-san.”

I accepted what I was meant to, and learned I wouldn’t have to do a request until next month. Planning May’s adventurer registration for the following day, I stood from my seat, and exited the guild with Clara.

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Having accepted the reward, Clara and I stopped by a food stall on the way to the inn.

Rather than being hungry myself, I wanted to bring back a souvenir for May given the amount she ate. Of course, Aria and Shannon would likely dig in as well.

While walking down the street lined with stalls, me and Clara picked out a few items.

“Meat skewers, is it? I’m sure May-san and Aria-san will be delighted, but Shannon-chan is a bit questionable.”

“Eh, really? Doesn’t she eat everything?”

When I said that, Clara looked at me, and shook her head.

“I do think there’s something wrong with that image you have of her. While she does eat a lot, she’s actually quite picky, and likes sweet things in particular.”

Come to think of it, that was quite true. But I still don’t doubt she’d be happy at receiving a meat skewer.

“Then should we get her some molded candy? No, rather than candy, perhaps some grilled sweet potato would be nice? How about you, Clara?”

“Me? No, I don’t require any food apart from at meal times.”

As an adventurer, she did eat her share, but compared to the other members, she was quite a light eater.

I remembered that sweets were supposed to help when you used your head, so I used a large copper to buy some sweet confectionaries from a nearby stand.

I handed the bag over.

“If it’s candy, it’ll last a while, and all you have to do is keep it in your mouth as you read. It won’t restrict your hands or anything.”

Clara nodded stiffly, as she accepted, and looked down a little.

From the Jewel came the Third’s voice.

『Oh, Lyle’s finally moved to raise Clara’s affection level!』

The Fourth without hesitation.

『Hm, if you take Shannon out of the picture- you bought her a pendent a while ago anyways- you’ve got seven left to please… you sure have it rough, boy!』

I got the urge to hit my ancestors as they laughed over the matter, but as of now, I’ve still yet to get a single blow in.

Perhaps today will be my lucky day.

And I heard a voice.

It was the voice of disputing adventurers. More specifically, as if a fight had broken out among comrades.

“So you’re saying it’s my fault!?”

When I turned my eyes to it, I saw Erhart with his large sword over his back. As always, he wore nothing but a tank top above. I really can’t understand that one.

Doesn’t he get cold like that?

Clara put the brown paper bag of candies under her arm as she looked over at Erhart.

“It looks like they’ve just came back from a request.”

He had the same sort of envelope I had received, and it was getting quite ruffled in his clenched fist. Before him were his comrades, or should I say lackeys, staring him down with unpleasant expressions.

“Of course it is! In the first place, saying one day without even looking it up… it took four whole days to reach, did it not!? And when we got there, you went and pissed the requester off, so we’re sure to get a low evaluation for it! We barely have any money on us, so what are you trying to do by reducing our income!?”

It seems he angered the client and dropped their evaluation.

I confirmed their actions from afar, and decided to keep a set distance. I was just a little curious as to why they would pick a place like this for a fight.

“All I did was buy a single freakin’ skewer from the stand, and this is what I get!? You’re way too high strung. If a worthy request comes along, we’ll be earning like there’s no tomorrow, so for now, shut it!”

Within all their monetary dissatisfaction, it seems he went off and bought a meat skewer for himself.

From within the Jewel, the Sixth spoke.

『No matter how you look at it, that’s no good.』

Erhart seemed quite fed up, but the Third laughed as he…

『Yeah~ everyone has their own way of leading people, but that one’s no good. He isn’t the type to lead with charisma, so just telling people to follow him is… did he already forget how he lost to Lyle? Well, it’s an interesting performance he puts on, but getting caught up in it will be a pain. Lyle, how about you leave as soon as you can?』

If he spotted me, perhaps he’d ask for a rematch here and now. That’s got to be bad, or how should I put it, more a pain, so took Clara’s hand, and led her away.

The Fifth let a few-up voice from the Jewel.

『Oblivious, and reckless. Well, he may grow a bit if he adventures for a while. If I had to say, then Lyle's too well-mannered for his position.』

To succeed, a certain level of reckless was necessary, said the Fifth. I do admit that such a side may prove essential.

But one step in the wrong direction, and it's self-destruction.

If all goes well, it's a success story, but the future really depends on the individual's disposition.

Crawling up, and establishing his own style of life as an adventurer isn't completely impossible.

I'm technically his senior, but here we're both newbies.

(I had Novem and the ancestors to advise me… otherwise, I may have been the one being laughed at right around now.)

Around Erhart, the troubled city dwellers. And the smiling places of adventurers among them.

The ones concerned continued on loudly without paying mind to such things.

Looking at Erhart, I honestly saw a possibility I shouldn't be playing around with.

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… A room of the guild.

There, Tanya gave her report on the adventurers to her superior.

She had submitted a number of forms, with her own evaluations on them.

The higher-up looked through the documents on the new adventurers enlisting in the east branch, as he sipped his tea.

He wasn't a former adventurer, but a type more proficient in managing magic stones. But he still had to hear of adventurer matters from those involved, and he was a superior highly regarded by his subordinates.

"So what's your opinion on the matter, 【Tahnia】? IS there any shining ray of talent in these files?"

Her name stressed strangely, Tahnia did not offer a correction. Because she accepted them as two separate names.

Tanya was the name of a guild employee.

While Tahnia was that of a sweeper.

"Yes. I think there are a number of parties that could turn up a profit. And it's about the party headed by Lyle…"

Her superior searched for the papers, took it in hand, and nodded.

"He's attained a high evaluation quite splendidly. It's not anything extraordinary, but not bad either. At this rate, it won't be long until he enters a labyrinth."

While nodding, Tahnia…

"Yes, the finest evaluation. But I can't help but think he was aiming for it."

Her superior looked at her.

"Unsatisfied with something?"

"No, proficient adventurers are the guild's precious assets. I do think

that he, his party, will become a valuable asset for the eastern branch."

Thinking Tahnia had found something shady on the boy, the higher-up took a sip of tea.

"Then isn't that fine? We need only support them. If they moderately complete requests such as this, then offer them a place in labyrinth subjugation. If you do nothing but use them, they'll flow somewhere else before you know it. You need a moderate level of bait on the table."

Hearing that, Tahnia nodded, and continued on with her report.

"And next up is one on the worse side of things."

The superior turned his eyes to a pile of documents he had been avoiding. But as it wasn't a rare occurrence, he didn't seem all that interested. These sorts of folks popped up every year without fail.

A ruckus over a duel, by young'uns who'd become adventurers oblivious to the point of the trade.

"Just do the usual. If they look to be useful to the guild, then guide them on, and if not, then leave them be. And if in the process, they end up wandering elsewhere, it'll actually be a blessing for us."

The guild liked to keep problematic adventurers at a distance.

And Erhart and co were just such adventurers. But it's not like they'd give up on them right away. There was always a fixed level of adventurers like them, and there were plenty of cases where such adventurers matured and grew.

The guild had their ways to turn them into the proper adventurers they imagined.

"Ah right… Tahnia, you're too competent a woman. Let's put a broad-minded receptionist in charge of them. And with this matter, let's make her their exclusive receptionist and call it a penalty."

That's just how many receptionists they had under their control. Such

treatments were possible.

A single beautiful receptionist could be set to come into contact with a number of parties, and motivate them. You could also call it a way to use them however it seemed convenient.

When the beauty who welcomed them to the guild so warmly sounded troubled over how no one would take up a request, what would they do? Perhaps they'd feel a sense of debt, or courtesy. Adventurers with such sentiment may take the initiative and complete such unfavorable requests splendidly.

Adventurers who'd stacked up some ability in another land would avoid such requests if they knew it would put them at a disadvantage.

And that's why, there always had to be a set amount of Erharts.

"Something something scissors are all about how you use them, was it? If he becomes a first-rate adventurer, the guild will benefit. And he'll also benefit greatly himself. No~ we all should be a relation where no one loses out, you know. Both the guild, and its adventurers."

(TL: The phrase he's going here is, 'Idiots and scissors are all about how you use them.' A Japanese idiom of which you can pretty much guess the meaning. The scissor part is on how even blunt scissors can cut if you use them right. This is also the Japanese title for the series Dog & Scissors, if you replace the idiot part with dog.)

Before her grinning superior, Tahnia nodded, collected up the documents over his desk, and tidily put them together.

"Well then, I'll be taking my leave."

Saying that, she left the room. Her superior:

"And good luck with the receptions desk, Tanya."

Epilogue

After finishing up May's adventurer registration, I sat on a sofa against one of the lobby's walls waiting for her tired form to come out of the new-comer introductory lecture.

I sat in that hard couch by the stairs as I saw a familiar group of adventurers with their noses held high as the spoke at the reception's desk.

When I inclined my ears, I could hear some broken lines, and from then, I inferred they had received a penalty.

Largely unable to complete the request they had been given, their evaluation was so low that instead of receiving a reward, they had to pay a fine, it seems.

But the party members led by Erhart seemed happy. I found it wondrous, but the moment I saw the face of the woman past their backs, the mysteries unraveled themselves.

Long blond hair, a warm-eyed woman with a fluffy overall impression was scolding them. And her scolding gestures were quite sweet.

"Are you listening!? Trust is the most important thing for adventurers, so you have to put your all into even the smallest of tasks!"

She was holding her index finger up and sternly rebuking them, but their eye levels were directed at her breasts.

"Y-yes. I understand."

Those party members listened to her explanations without the slightest objection.

Age-wise, I guess she's my elder? I wonder by how much, though.

Her green eyes were serious, and there's no doubt she was truly worried for Erhart and his cohorts.

But her standard guild uniform had been modified a bit. With adjustments to place more emphasis on her large chest area, she was- unlike Tanya- kind and light hearted.

And like that, she continued giving her sermon.

“For a while, I will properly manage you all as your exclusive receptionist! For starters, let’s have you take care of some jobs you can do for sure. If you cannot pay the fine, then as long as you accomplish an extent of requests, you’ll even be able to use the guild’s lodging facilities.”

Without any money, all of them besides Erhart… no even Erhart didn’t exactly have proper equipment. And for such a party, she’d introduce a number of miscellaneous requests.

(I heard the guild had its own lodging facilities, but is that how it is? It’s not like they’d let you stay there for free.)

The receptionist lady said they’d be able to pay the fine in instalments, even going as far as to say she’d convince the guild herself.

“Normally you’d have to pay a lump sum, but I’ve let that slide. Please pay it back when you can. Once that’s done with, you’ll be working some more and getting proper equipment in order. And until you do all that, monster hunting is prohibited!”

On the animatedly furious receptionist’s declarations, they offered their heartfelt gratitude.

(Were guild receptionists supposed to have that much authority? And wait, are they supposed to go that far to begin with?)

As I pondered over that, the receptionist woman smiled.

“Let’s all do our best together.”

“Yes!”

After Erhart gave such a forceful reply, the other members offered

their vigorous agreement. And they went into various paper works.

Looking down as they filled out the forms, the receptionist's long hair fell over her ears, so she used her hand to put it back in place. In that instant, she looked in my direction.

Erhart and the rest didn't seem to notice as they wrote their names on the sheets.

But the eyes she sent weren't the… fluffy ones from before. Her atmosphere also seemed a little sharper than before. And looking at me, she smiled before starting up her work once more.

As I stood there surprised, I heard heavy footsteps coming down the stairs.

Jumping with high momentum, May landed before calling out to me.

"Did I keep you waiting?"

"Eh? No, well… a little."

I stood from my seat, and took May out the guild lobby.

(What exactly was that?)

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Night.

In the Jewel, I was facing the Third Generation Head.

Within his room of memories, a town spread out around us.

And in that town's plaza, I faced his one-handed sword.

『It surely was suspicious. But would they really go so far to deceive them and have them erased? Even when they might disappear if they just leave them be!』

He talked as he swung his sword, repelling my sword, and trying to get in a kick. But when I retreated, he kicked the ground to send sand at me.

I moved my hands to prevent my vision from being taken away, and…

“Dam-!”

Before I could finish the word, the Third used his sword to pierce deeply into my leg.

An illusion of his entered my vision, and the Sabre I suddenly held out was unable to stop his slash. This time my left arm was cut.

『Hahaha, still too naïve, Lyle.』

Heading for the water fountain in the plaza, he kicked aside his sword, and sat down on a nearby bench.

After my pain receded, and my wounds disappeared, I headed over to him.

“Please fight me again.”

When I asked for a rematch, he smiled.

『I refuse. You’re too packed with the basics, and as you are now, it’ll only be pointless. Instructor-taught swordplay, is all. You’re way too honest, Lyle.』

The Third looked down on my stream of attacks following the style I was taught. Having fought across many a battlefield, and slain monsters again and again, the ancestors held the forms of their golden years.

As I am, I can’t reach up to them.

I cast my eyes down and clenched my fist. He addressed me.

『Lyle, it's important enough to try and win against me in swordplay, but aren't you forgetting something? Forging nothing but the sword won't get you anywhere. You're final goal is…』

"… Winning against Celes. For that sake, I need at least enough ability to stand on the same battlefield."

To win against Celes, the ancestors had thought up a number of requirements.

A force that could hold up against the Walt House and the armies of Bahnseim.

A small elite force to combat Celes herself.

To put it simply, we had to make an environment where victory was a possibility.

The ancestors' training was merely a small portion of that. More so if we managed to make an ally of one capable of winning against her in battle, then it would become quite unnecessary.

『… If all you do is defeat her, it will all fall to the Walt House's responsibility. After that victory, there would be nothing left for the future. And your numbers of less than ten won't topple a country. War is the sort of thing where there's no meaning of diving in unless you know you can win.』

For the sake of winning, the past heads were lending me their wisdom. For the sake of winning, I was gathering comrades. But at this rate, I really wonder how long it will take.

Noticing my impatience, the Third spoke to admonish me.

『If you're half-baked in challenging her, then I'm sure her madness will spread across the continent. If you're doing it, you have one shot. And don't aim for mutual destruction, look towards complete victory. Otherwise you may be executed as a man of the same house as her. That would be the

same as betraying the comrades that've lent you their aid.』

That being the case, I don't know any means of catching up to her level. And I myself didn't have any military force to speak of.

Rallying up the surrounding countries to challenge Bahnseim will also be difficult.

『Impatience won't improve your success rate. Hurrying and rushing are different things. And for starters, you should gather up information.』

Information on other countries will gather in Beim.

Having completed my first request here, I could earnestly begin working in this city.

"I haven't even started on the information."

I said that in self-scorn, and the Third made a serious face.

『At any rate, even if they think Bahnseim strange, the surrounding nations won't think to attack. Perhaps we have some responsibility in letting their territory grow so vast, though.』

The Sixth and Seventh had made large contributions to Bahnseim's expansion.

The Third was the same, having saved it from crisis.

『Lyle, want to make a promise with me?』

"A promise?"

The Third stood from the Bench, and put his fist to my chest.

『You have to look to the after story. Your life isn't something that will end with the fall of a young girl. The aid we give is there because we want the future that comes beyond it all. That the Walt bloodline that ties us… that it will continue on through that future.』

“… The future, is it?”

The Third nodded.

『Right. So I don’t want you to resolve yourself to take each other out.』

“… Even if, because of that, a large number of lives are to be lost?”

『That’s right. Don’t be conceited. Even a goddess can’t save every single human life there is. Yet thinking a single human could do all that is just arrogance. And no matter how you struggle, at present, you won’t be able to win against Celes. It isn’t even a gamble at this point.』

From the moment I thought to go against the country, I could see the helplessly large gap between me and Celes. But from the moment I decided to go through with it, I get the feeling the gap had become greater in my mind.

“… I’ll definitely win out. I’ll get the future in my hands.”

The Third removed his fist from me, smiled, and walked off.

『That’s how it should be.』

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… The Bahnseim Kingdom.

A single village was in flames.

Those surrounding it were the rank and file of the Bahnseim army.

Armored knights lined up on their horses. In the center of them stood Maizel Walt in his own protective gear.

Celes' specially made palanquin was equipped with a roof, and the knights to carry it were stationed on its sides. On top of the carrier currently placed on the ground, Celes sat in her chair and watched the fire burn on.

"That barely took any time at all."

With an unpleased expression on her face, Celes was wearing special-ordered dress-like armor over her body.

Maizel…

"With thirty thousand to surround it, a single small village is nothing, dear. Good grief, what foolish folk them must be to try and go against Celes."

The crown prince of the kingdom had caused an uproar by suddenly changing his bride to be. And when news of Celes spread, Nobles looking to rebel started showing themselves.

"I thought them gallant lords of the provinces, but what a miscalculation."

Being governed by a viscount, the village's residents were cut down by the soldiers as they tried to flee. The surrounding villages were also under attack by the lords who voiced their intent to cooperate.

Pillage, plunder, all were going on, but no one thought to condemn it.

Celes stared over the burning village, and thought it something completely unworthy of the army she had gone to great lengths to bring all the way here…

"Well, so be it. Even so, I can't hear a thing. Bring me closer."

She addressed the knights to carry her palanquin.

A knight…

"B-but if something were to happen to Celes-sama…"

The armored knight objected, so Maizel drew the sabre at his waist, and in the gaps of his armor… the blade sunk into his neck, causing his swift demise.

“You think a daughter of the Walt House need fear for something of this level!? This is why imperial nobles are…”.

Seeing Maizel’s bloodshot eyes, the palanquin knights… the knights of low imperial nobility learned fear.

The blood that had splashed out of the knights armor had landed on Celes’ face. She wiped it with her fingertip, pressed it again her lip, and licked.

And having seen that action, the knights’ hearts were lost in fascination.

“Father, I want to know of the battlefield. And… there seems to be one of their knights still fighting. Can you not let me pass? I must personally meet with their hero.”

Seeing her smile, Maizel still seemed reluctant.

“But the opponent is a knight of renown. He has already struck down several tens of our riders. Letting my daughter before such a man is a little…”

To poor incoherent and nonsensical Maizel, Celes smiled as she spoke to the surrounding knights.

“You sure are prone to worry, dear father. Now, let us go and witness their hero. It’s alright… I’m here, so we are sure to win.”

The knights that gathered around to lift up her stand gulped as they saw her up so high. They hoisted up the palanquin, and so Celes went to the battlefield carried on the backs of scores of men.

And after the messenger ran out, the kingdom’s knights and soldiers stepped back from the knight defending his village.

He looked in doubt at the mounted knights around him, but seeing the palanquin with Celes on it coming with the main force, he rode forth on his horse to take it down.

That he was a skilled fighter was something Celes could understand from his form. Maizel as well.

“Hm, he’s not bad.”

When Celes thought about how the knight was still only in his mid-twenties, she started to want him.

“My horse, please.”

On her words, the palanquin was lowered, and her favored steed showed itself. With black scales, and an ashen mane, that divine beast with a horn growing from its head was none other than a quilin.

“Wait right there, Celes! That one’s strong. If you’re to get the slightest of injuries, I don’t know what…”

To her father’s sorrow, she sent a wink.

“I’ll be just fine, oh worrywart father of mine.”

After straddling herself over the quilin, she accepted the rapier her subordinates presented to her. She kicked its stomach to start it on a gallop, and purposely had it race along the earth.

Her knights and soldiers opened a path for her, and before her eyes, the knight splashed in blood held up his lance to begin his assault.

His armor was made quite efficient, yet it was ornamented towards elegance. Perhaps his horse was a reputable one, but it sturdily raced on as its masters legs.

Unity of rider and horse.

To have accumulated something like that, just how much training had the man before her packed into that body of his?

“Ah~, I want you. A thousand times better than Rufus!”

His sharp eyes were directing hatred at her. While finding that fact quite pleasant, Celes ran her mouth on how she wanted him more than the crown prince.

As they passed one another, her rapier and his lance crossed.

Sparks flew, and their heads turned to look at one another. The knight took up his weapon in both hands, and used only his legs to maneuver his horse as he unfolded another thrust.

“You monster!!”

The sharpness of his lance thrilled the young girl. She used her slender rapier to repel the strike of the heavy lance. Normally, that action would have destroyed his stance, but undeterred, he continued a stream of attacks at her.

“How nice. You, you’re really nice. I’ll add you to my imperial guard. Now, how about you tell me your name? And take off that unrefined thing on your head.”

She hadn’t been wearing a helmet from the start, and as she couldn’t see her opponent’s face, she opted to send his own flying off his head.

His face visible, she caught sight of a young man of elegant features with a sharp glint in his eyes grabbing the reigns to take distance.

The helm flying through the air landed atop Celes’ right hand, and grabbing it, she let it spin on her left.

“Now say your name.”

But the opposing knight…

“I refuse! I have no obligation to name myself to one as base as yourself! Invading without a much a declaration of war, and burning down our city. I will never forgive you!”

Celes' smile suddenly turned to a bothersome expression.

(Yeah, you can find them here and there. These sorts…)

A voice came from the yellow Jewel embedded in the rapier's hilt. It was a charming voice, and it sounded as if its speaker was smiling.

『Looks like you were rejected, Celes. But 'tis truly a pity. I'm sure he's of the finest of knights in Bahnseim… what will you do?』

Celes inclined her ear to the voice.

"Let's see. Do you have any fun ideas on your side?"

The knight before her twitched his eyebrows as he stared at Celes, and held up the lance.

『A loyal knight, is it? Hmmm, leaving him alive to watch over the demise of those he was to protect may prove an interesting sight. You've yet to try that one yourself, have you? I'm sure he'll make a face much more interesting than what you'll witness if you cut him down yourself. 』

Celes' lips warped into the shape of a crescent moon, and she kicked the quilin's stomach to send it running at the knight. He also urged on his steed, and attacked with the lance.

After crossing, they lowered speed, and came to a stop.

A notch appeared in a portion of Celes' skirt.

"Oh my."

『You weren't paying attention, were you. Celes, why must you always be like that? Carry yourself with more elegance, won't you? With that matter with Lyle, that makes this the second.』

Hearing Lyle's name, a crease spread across her brow.

"… If Novem wasn't there, I'd have cut him up. The very fact that

thing lives on is…”

A happy voice from the Jewel.

『I told you to just keep the boy as a plaything, yet you’re so adamant about it. I’d prefer to be loved by one like him. Handsome, and surely skilled as a knight… and by that thing, you’d be referring to yourself as well.』

Celes stroked her hair as she turned around and looked at the knight.

“Hm, I hate that part of you.”

Turning around in a similar fashion, the knight spit up blood… His lance fell to the ground along with his right arm and all.

And along with it came the horse’s head. The moment it touched down, red blood spread across the parched earth, only to be absorbed into it at once.

“D-damn you…”

Celes brought the quilin up close to him.

“Ah~ looks like I went too far.”

『He won’t last long like that. Now then…』

But the knight continued to show his willpower up to the end. He took out a concealed dagger with his left hand, and tried to jump at Celes.

When her eyes narrowed, a spear suddenly impaled the knight’s body.

“Oh.”

Celes stared blankly at her own knight who had thrust the spear. The knight who, to carry her own palanquin, had equipped light-weight armor, thrust the spear in deeply once more.

With cold steel embedded in his flank, the man spat up a large amount

of blood.

“Don’t think you’ll be able to do this sort of thing forever… someday, you’ll all… go to hell.”

Letting off a sigh, Celes lopped off his head. And she sent a look at the kneeling knight who had saved her as she brought her hands to the head of the knight who tried to kill her.

She grabbed his hair, and observed his final expression.

“You, what’s your name?”

“It’s Breid Vamper, Celes-sama!”

Maizel drew closer on his horse, and drew his sabre.

“You… outstepped your rank!”

Maizel was about to kill him, but Celes put a stop to it. She tossed the knight’s head and helmet towards Breid.

“That’s no good, father. You should reward him for saving me. I’ll give you all of that knight’s equipment. From today onwards, join my imperial guard.”

Hearing that, Breid…

“Y-yes!”

He was moved to tears.

Breid Vamper… the knight who had been in a love relationship with Doris of the Circry House. But at present his loyalty lay to Celes alone.

Celes dismounted her quilin, and returned to her palanquin.

A voice came from the Jewel.

『Are you satisfied with this measly amount of blood, Celes?』

She responded with a smile.

“Surely you jest. We’ll only go forward from here. I want to see the sight of the earth soaked in blood. More importantly, teach me more fun things, won’t you?”

Badgered by Celes, the charming voice from the Jewel continued on.

『Fufufu, that simplicity of yours is quite favorable. Right, how about surrounding a village, and having the villagers kill one another? It’s usually quite a show.』

Hearing that, Celes…

“Oh, nice! That’s it! We must be off to an untouched village at once! Father!”

She immediately called out to her father.

Maizel responded to that.

“What’s the matter, Celes. Have you been injured? You have to change out of those blood spattered garments. We’ve brought along plenty of dresses and armors for you, after all.”

Using the money of the national treasury, and even levying a new tax for the girl.

But not a soul came forth to find fault in that. Thus has been shown what would happen if someone did.

“I want to play in a village nearby. Let’s finish up here, and move on to the next.”

As if to spoil his child, Maizel smiled.

“I see. Plunder is also an important duty of feudal lords. I’ll start the preparations at once. Oh, before that…”

Maizel issued orders to the magicians.

“We’re good. Playtime is over. Erase it from the map.”

The magicians raised up their staffs, and let out light signals to communicate. From the other squadrons stationed around the village came the sound of a bell, and the knights and soldiers began to pull out.

After a bit, Maizel nodded to Celes, and she…

“Bang!”

Protruding out her thumb, she said that with her index finger pointed at the town.

The surrounding forces rained down their magic.

Fire, water, earth, wind, lightning… all came down, and a single village disappeared. At the same time, a few thousands lives disappeared as well.

But unrelated to that, Celes…

“Ahaha, I guess Bang was a bit uncalled for.”

When she laughed out, Maizel smiled.

“What of it. You’re cute no matter what you do, Celes. Oh, you’ve already been engaged, so perhaps I should use the word beautiful?”

Celes inflated her cheeks.

“Don’t tease me so, father. Now…”

She urged Maizel on.

“Hm, let’s move on to an affiliated village at once. Oy, we’re heading to the next site. Find a village another lord has yet to attack.”

Watching her father give orders to the nearby knights, Celes seemed

satisfied.

And from the Jewel, she looked at her.

『Celes, you sure are cute.』

And let out such words…

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In a café in Beim, Novem was waiting for a certain individual.

Lyle's party was on a break day, so its members were operating separately. Unbeknownst to all, Novem had come there to come into contact with that person.

The door of the small café opened, and the bell fastened to it rung out through the store. Novem heard footsteps, and without even turning around, she knew the one that had called for her had arrived.

The shopkeeper went to guide him to a seat, but the customer spotted Novem, ordered a drink, and walked over to her table.

Carrying along a package, he sat across, and cut straight to business.

"It's been quite a while. I doubt pleasantries are necessary, so I'll say what I must. It happened as you said it would, Novem."

Novem sipped her tea.

"Is that so."

That's all she had to say.

The other party went on.

“… A viscount of Bahnseim really was erased. Towns, villages, and all. Everything was brushed away.”

“I was sure it would come down to this.”

Not shrinking back at her attitude, he presented the package to her.

“It’s from father. And today, I’ve come to break ties with you.”

Novem looked at his face as she accepted it.

“… You’ve decided to follow Celes-sama have you, onii-sama?”

The young man named as her brother thanked the shopkeeper as his drink was brought over, and took a sip.

He looked outside.

His seat was by the window, and there was a considerable number of people in the shop. There were couples and parents and children.

“Father says he is unable to betray Maizel. I will abide by his decision. Because with Lyle-sama having left the Walt House, only Celes-sama remains.”

It wasn’t just Novem who had their mysteries.

The Forxuz House itself had its fair share. With their loyalty towards the Walt House rather than the throne, they were seen as heretical by others.

“Among our household, I’m sure you’re the one with the thickest blood. You’re always calm. And I’m sure your decision on the matter isn’t wrong. You can process everything so indifferently, after all.”

On her brother’s words, Novem answered as indifferently as ever… and stopped.

“… Onii-sama, the thickness of one’s blood is irrelevant. We all have those memories.”

“That’s right, but you’re the only one who inherited them so clearly, Novem.”

Taking sips, and continuing their conversation bit by bit, it came that there wasn’t a drop left in their cups.

“Next we meet, we’ll be enemies.”

“Yes.”

“You’re not one to be flustered with us standing before you, but… what of Lyle-sama?”

Novem thought about Lyle.

“He’s on the kinder side, so he may hesitate.”

“I see. I wanted to serve him too.”

Watching her brother say that with a sorrowful smile, Novem picked up the package, and stood to leave. She took his check as well.

“Being treated by my younger sister will make me lose what little standing I have left, you know?”

At his joke, Novem smiled.

“It’s my thanks for coming all the way out here. Now then, see you on the battlefield.”

She went off the counter to pay. Watching her back, her brother called out for a last time.

“Novem, you think Lyle-sama will take you?”

As she left the store, she looked at her brother’s face, and smiled. And seeing that, he closed his eyes, and hung his head.

“I see…”

Giving a response her sibling could understand, she left the store, and held the package quite preciously as she walked down the streets of Beim.

But rather than expressionless, her face was just a little sorrowful…